

HUNS
IN PALESTINE

L. DE SOUSA

in Jerusalem, and will
thank you when you can
spare the time to read
it, to have the kindness
of letting me know your
most valuable opinion
on such a work.

With kindest regards

Yours sincerely
Moses Tugury

3 Emmanuel Avenue
Acton W3

London 13th May 1918

Rev. The Mahom

W. M. Gaster

193 Maida Vale
London

Dear Sir I take the liberty
to offer you the enclosed
first work of my son,
under the name of A.
de Souza, which is on
the subject of the King
Sennacherib of Assyria
against the King of Judah

1. The name of the person
 2. The date of the birth
 3. The place of the birth
 4. The name of the father
 5. The name of the mother
 6. The name of the spouse
 7. The name of the children
 8. The name of the parents
 9. The name of the grandparents
 10. The name of the great-grandparents

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HUNS IN PALESTINE

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HUNS IN PALESTINE

BY
L. de SOUSA

LONDON : ANDREW MELROSE, LTD.
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TO MY DEAR WIFE
TO WHOSE
CONSTANT ENCOURAGEMENT
THIS BOOK OWES MUCH

FOREWORD

TWENTY-SIX centuries ago a little country, much smaller than Belgium, was overrun by a great military power as marvellously organized and disciplined, for that period of the world's history, as modern Germany. The little country was known as the Kingdom of Judah and the great military power was Assyria.

As the Germans swept through Belgium and Northern France but failed to capture Paris, so did the Assyrians sweep through Palestine, but failed to capture Jerusalem, the Holy City. Legends are already materializing around the Battle of the Marne, where the German advance was stopped. The legend that materialized around the failure of the Assyrians is known to all:

“And it came to pass that night, that the Angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand: and when men arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.”

In this book I have tried to bring to life again the Assyrians, those early advocates of “frightfulness,” and the small nation which they sought to overwhelm; and I have tried to clothe with flesh the bare skeleton of the happenings of that distant time, as we know them from the contemporary records.

It is perhaps permissible to believe that the same Power that helped to disperse the legions of the Assyrian “Kaiser,” that Power which spoke through the mouth of Isaiah of Jerusalem, may have helped to check the German legions within a few miles of Paris.

CHAPTER I

FROM the platform of the Tower of the Ovens, Amon, Prince of the B'ne-David, looked down on the tiny sparkling lights of the city. For many weary hours he had stood and mournfully watched the red glare in the western sky and the trailing smoke-clouds that betokened the burning of the cities and villages of Judah by the Assyrian invaders. The night seemed to palpitate with a thousand confused sounds. Sentinels called to each other from the walls and battlements; the clash of arms, occasional shouts, and the mournful howling of dogs came up from the narrow lanes of the city. The trees in the Valley of Hinnom were gently stirred by a perfumed breeze, and far to the south-east could be felt the presence of the awful black gulf of the Salt Sea.

The great orange moon rose over the hills of Moab, eclipsing the distant conflagrations and lighting up the glowing whiteness of the Temple and the hundred domes of the Palace of the Kings of Judah. It waned amid an irradiating sheen of gold and silver, leaving a feeling of desolation in Amon's soul. The blackness of the heavens, studded with myriads of glittering stars, gradually lightened to a deep blue. The blue changed to purple, then to pink, and finally to red. Swifts began to fly past the houses in increasing numbers, and as the first golden beams of the sun broke across the

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Mount of Olives trumpets blared forth from the Temple pylons, and the white smoke of the morning sacrifice rose in a thin spiral from its courts. The order to open the gates was given, and the crowds of fugitives that had been camping outside the walls throughout the hot summer night began to pour into Jerusalem.

Trains of mules laden with grain and provisions, and urged by the hoarse cries of their drivers, jostled against stately slow-pacing camels from whose necks hung large crescents of gold. On their backs swayed richly-ornamented palanquins bearing the governors and royal tax-officers from the neighbouring cities, accompanied by their wives and concubines, and escorted by their slaves. Some hundreds of shame-stricken soldiers marched in, lacking even the dignity of defeat. They were mostly left-handed Benjamite slingers and light archers bearing the small round shield made of rhinoceros hide. They had been surprised at Kirjath-jearim by a detachment of Assyrian lancers and had been put to flight without being able to strike a blow, and now curses were hurled from all sides at their cowardice.

Behind them came a company of black-robed *kemarim*, priests from the temple of the Baal of Gibeon of Benjamin, in the throes of a wild religious frenzy. A half-naked devotee of the god preceded them, blowing loud blasts on a brass horn twisted into the shape of a serpent. Their orange turbans seemed almost blood-red in the rays of the morning sun, and their robes were open at the breast and sleeveless. Blood flowed from great gashes which they had inflicted on themselves with two-edged bronze knives, the handles of which were carved into obscene shapes. Some played flutes, cymbals and tambourines. Others

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kept up a wild and continuous ululation by beating upon their open mouths with their hands. Shameless, smooth-faced eunuch priests of Ashtoreth, clad in white garments and covered with jewels, wearing long golden wigs, their faces painted and their eyes brightened with *kohl*, mingled brazenly with bands of Phœnician, Syrian and Egyptian *kedeshot*. These were women who prostituted themselves daily in honour of the goddess, and whose rounded limbs and white breasts gleamed beneath the transparent veils that barely covered them.

Unwearied by his long watch, the Prince descended from the tower and made his way through the Bazaar of the Bakers, which lay in the tangle of narrow lanes just inside the south-west walls. He had some difficulty in passing through the crowds of beggars, slaves, merchants and officials who thronged the bazaar and pressed round him, greeting him and trying to kiss the hem of his tunic, for he was the most popular and best-beloved man in Jerusalem. His stature and the breadth of his mighty chest were magnificent. His hair escaped in long, jet-black ringlets from under the rim of his bronze helmet, and a black beard, divided into curls and brilliant with perfumed unguents, lay on his breast. His nose was thin and aquiline. His lips were full and of a rich red, displaying now and then the gleam of snow-white teeth, while his eyes were of a deep grey flecked with brown. A fringed tunic of purple leather covered with metallic scales was secured round his waist by a richly-embroidered girdle, from which hung a short, curved sword in an ivory scabbard. High-laced boots reached to his knees and gold rings adorned his ears, while on his right wrist a thick bracelet of gold set with a large carbuncle, on which was engraved the

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Lion of Judah, bore witness to the royal rank of its wearer.

It was not the first time that Prince Amon made a round of the city and noted with anxiety and sorrow the effect produced on the inhabitants by the evil news that reached them day after day, for the scourge of the Assyrian invasion lay like a blight on the whole land. In the first days of the invasion a wave of religious frenzy had passed over the whole population. Eager crowds pressed into the Temple Courts with propitiatory offerings to Jahveh. Women sacrificed their long tresses to the Lady Ashtoreth. Maidens from some of the noblest families did not hesitate even to offer up their chastity to the Queen of Heaven, for whom all the women in Jerusalem were busy baking cakes of meal and honey. In her Temple on the Mount of Olives the golden statue of the goddess, standing naked on a lion and holding serpents in her hands, was covered with precious jewels, while her voluptuous priestesses gathered a rich harvest from the frenzied worshippers whom they welcomed in their perfumed and curtained cells in the Temple gardens. But now, at the end of the month, Sivan Sennacherib, the Great King, and his Assyrian hordes were practically masters of the whole of Phœnicia, of the most important cities of the Philistines and of all the lower hills of Judah, and they also held the principal passes leading to the mountainous regions of the centre.

With great bitterness of spirit Amon realized that only two obstacles remained to bar the Assyrians' advance against Egypt. In Jerusalem King Hezekiah, the head of the Palestinian coalition, stood fast within his mighty walls, relying upon a considerable force of Hebrew warriors, mostly seasoned veterans, who,

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under the fiery leadership of Amon himself, had carried on a fierce guerilla warfare for several years against the rich cities of the Philistines. A large number of Arab mercenaries from over the Jordan and from the desert had also flocked into Jerusalem, attracted by promises of rich pay. In addition the strongly-fortified cities of Ekron and Lachish continued to offer a stubborn resistance, and it was before the latter city that the greater part of Sennacherib's army now lay within a great fortified camp, while two detached divisions, headed by the Crown Prince Ardi-Belit, besieged Ekron.

Climbing up the steep and narrow streets that led to the Upper City, the Prince passed in front of the Palace of the Vizier Shebna, the discredited intriguer who was at the head of the Egyptian party in Judah, and who had done all in his power to make King Hezekiah take a prominent part in the coalition against Assyria. A furious rabble was gathered outside the Vizier's house, howling like dogs and calling for his death. And Amon knew that within the thick stone walls the cowardly Shebna lay hidden in the depths of his harem, biting his fingers, muttering threats in his beard, and never daring to go out unless surrounded by a strong force of armed retainers. In the Street of the Fish Gate, which ran close to the western walls of the Temple, there were hundreds of disciples before the house of the Holy Prophet Isaiah. Most of them were half delirious because of the length of time they had fasted and of the penances they had imposed upon themselves. They prayed aloud incessantly, and whenever the Holy Prophet came out to preach to them their religious dances and their prayers became wilder and more frenzied.

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Farther towards the centre of the town, in the narrow lanes that ran from the Maktesh to the Street of David, Amon met a band of men carrying aloft a young child dressed in white and with shaven head. They shouted words which caused women to draw their children to them in sudden terror.

“A sacrifice! A sin-offering! A burnt-offering to Jahveh the King!”

Continuing his way by the broad flight of steps at the side of the Pool of Siloam as far as the Fountain Gate, the Prince ascended the great tower from which all the roads leading to the south-west could be seen. On its summit men watched continuously for the first glimpse of the returning messengers who had been sent, three days earlier, to the Assyrian camp at Lachish. For King Hezekiah, at last realizing that the time for submission had come, lest he lose everything, had sent a message to the Great King, and this was the burden of it: “I have offended; return from me: that which thou puttest on me will I bear!”

On the platform of the tower many officers and others were listening to the impassioned words of a soldier, who stopped suddenly on the appearance of the Prince until he bade him continue. The speaker was an Israelite captain, Gaddijah by name, who had been captured as a youth at the fall of Samaria, and had spent many years in the Assyrian army. The call of his blood, however, proved stronger than years of training, and when, the previous year, he had been sent to take command of the bodyguard of Bel-natsir, the Assyrian *shaknu* or Governor of Samaria, he had deserted and joined his brethren in Judah. Gaddijah had been explaining to the men around him why this incursion of Assyrians into the West was more deter-

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mined and dangerous than any that had preceded it, and the hopelessness of organizing any effective military resistance.

“Fools and sons of fools are those who counsel resistance!” he cried excitedly. “No earthly power can stop Assyria from reaching her goal, which is Egypt, sooner or later. And it is far better to yield now and pay than to be crushed for ever as Samaria was crushed. Have I not seen with my own eyes the armies of Ashur going forth from Nineveh and from Kalah year after year, and always returning victorious and laden with spoil? Did I not myself take part in the expedition of King Sargon to the snow-mountains of the far North when he overthrew Ursha, the King of Urartu? I tell you all that walls and soldiers are of no avail against their iron discipline, their vast numbers, the wondrous construction of their siege-machines which pound the stoutest walls to dust, or the cunning and fury of their attacks. Courage alone will not win battles against the Assyrians!”

A smile of indulgent disbelief passed over the features of the Prince as he turned to some of the veterans around him.

“What say you, children? You who have so often seen the Philistines fly before our brave warriors, and you, Shaftan, old comrade, who have so often fought by my side until our swords were dripping with the blood of the enemy; do you think the Assyrians are not as other men?”

“Not so, Lord!” cried Shaftan, the grizzled old warrior who had been Amon’s military tutor. “Gad-dijah’s head has been turned by his long stay in the accursed country of Ashur, until he has come to think that their new-fangled machines have a god in them,

or that to make men fight in a crowd like sheep is better than to rely on a stout heart and a strong sword ! ”

“ By Ashur ! ” started Gaddijah angrily. A shout of rage interrupted him at this invocation of a foreign god.

“ Nay, comrades, forgive me,” he continued, raising his hand in deprecation, “ ’tis but an old habit learned in Assyria. But for five years I was a captain in the bodyguard of the Prince Sennacherib before he came to the throne, and you little know how marvellously he has developed and trained this wonderful cavalry of his that is laying the land of Judah waste. It was his one pleasure in life, his hobby, and under his guidance we became as men of iron, inured to the most terrible fatigues. Nothing in the world has ever equalled our discipline, the perfection of our equipment or the length and rapidity of our rides. When the King of Tabal rebelled, we burst upon his land like a flood of fire and iron. We crossed the highest mountain passes, surrounded by precipices the sight of which inspires terror ; we pillaged villages ; we burnt the crops and trampled them under the hoofs of our fiery horses ; we captured and enslaved the inhabitants ; and almost before our presence was suspected we had passed like a whirlwind in the desert ! ”

“ Aye, Gaddijah,” said the Prince, “ and like a whirlwind they will beat in vain against these walls of ours, even if they are able to bring any large number of their horses or their machines up here, which I doubt. Besides, have we left undone anything that we should have done ? Has not our Lord the King—blessings upon him !—sent messengers to Lachish to offer the submission that you speak of, Gaddijah, and have we

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not taken every precaution against Assyrian treachery ? And though I have not much faith in the help of Egypt, yet this very morning messages of hope have arrived at the Palace. The Pharaohs of Bubastis and of Tanis are at Zalu on the border. The King of Ethiopia is sending his son the Prince Tirhakah northwards to organize the Egyptian forces at No-Amon, and the King of Melukha, with five hundred chariots and countless warriors, has reached Kadesh of the Wilderness."

The Prince's words caused a great stir of interest, and he was assailed on all sides by a volley of questions and exclamations.

"At Zalu !"

"Say you so indeed, Ben-David ?"

"But why do they delay ? If Lachish and Ekron fall, the Assyrians will eat up the whole land."

Gaddijah only was not to be moved from his doubting attitude. He laughed mockingly at the mention of Egypt.

"Egypt ! Mighty Egypt ! The Great House that is always about to strike and never does ! Egypt will do whatever her black masters from Cush tell her to do, though she cannot do much. Twenty years ago Samaria waited for Egypt's help, and you know the result. They are waiting for it now inside the walls of Ekron and of Lachish, and it seems we too must wait for Mizraim !"

"If we trust not in our walls, nor yet in Mizraim's help, in what then shall we trust, O praiser of Ashur ?" asked another soldier.

Before Gaddijah could answer, an old man, who had been listening intently to the soldiers' talk, raised his voice in protest. He rocked his body to and fro as he

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spoke in deep, vibrant tones, almost chanting his words.

“Trust in Jahveh, O valiant ones! Trust in the Holy One of Israel, who watcheth over His Temple and whose Holy City is inviolable! Jahveh saves and Jahveh destroys! Jahveh of Hosts shall cause the Assyrians to be swallowed up!”

Ironical laughter burst from the soldiers' lips at the old man's words, but Amon, with a commanding gesture, checked their mirth. Though his belief in the help of Jahveh in such a material extremity was not very strong, still he felt a great respect for the old man, whose name was Elishama, and whose duty it was to officiate in the place of the High Priest in case the latter were ill.

“Jahveh helps those who help themselves, father,” said the Prince. “Shall we move the wolf to tenderness with prayers and soft words? Look there!” He pointed suddenly towards the north-west, where a pall of black smoke hung over the site of Gibeon of Benjamin. “If yonder smoke will not cause Jahveh to stay the Assyrians, is He more likely to be moved by the smoke of burning oxen and sheep? If the blood of His children, poured out like water by their enemies, will not quench the flames of His anger, will they be quenched by drink-offerings? Better to keep our cattle for food if the Great King's army should indeed come to besiege Jerusalem, and as for the precious wines of Lebanon and Helbon, we shall want them to warm our blood in the last hours of the siege if Sennacherib be fated to break down these mighty ramparts!” And the Prince's hand swept out with a proud gesture towards the massive walls and towers all around him, some of which rose to

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over two hundred feet above the bottom of the encircling valleys. The old priest appeared about to speak again, but the group of soldiers broke up chattering and laughing and dispersed to their various duties, leaving the Prince in animated converse with Gaddijah and Shaftan.

The sun rose higher and higher in the heavens, and throughout the day the stream of fugitives continued to pour into the city, men and beasts languishing and sickening under the burning blasts of the desert wind. Near sunset Amon and his two companions, in the course of their duties of inspection, reached the platform of another great tower which had been built at the end of the Broad Wall to command the approach to the Gate of Ephraim. The flat roofs of the Upper City and of the Maktesh were crowded with people preparing for the nightly feasts which were due rather to the wildness of despair than to any real desire for enjoyment. Under the influence of the dying sun, Jerusalem flashed into dazzling glory. Her walls, her battlements and her towers shone as if built of gold and flamed with all the hues of the rainbow. The fire of ephemeral rubies mingled with the paler beauty of amethysts and of glittering opals, and the Prince's eyes grew strangely pensive as he gazed at the great Temple pylons, and at the royal palace that lay within the protection of their shadow. For there dwelt the Lady Nehushta, the King's daughter, whose glorious beauty was famous from the harems of Babylon to the palaces of the Pharaoh of Cush.

Suddenly Shaftan drew the Prince's attention to the Millo fortress, a great square structure flanked by towers at each corner and abutting on the Palace Gardens. Soldiers were swarming out on the platforms

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of the two western towers and firing volleys of arrows into the street below them, which was invisible to Amon. The same thought sprang instantly into the minds of the three men, and the pessimistic Gaddijah was the first to voice it.

“By Ishtar! The Arabs have rebelled!”

For several days rumours of disaffection among the Arab mercenaries had been rife, so that there was some justification for Gaddijah's exclamation. With hurried steps the three men hastened across the city towards the Millo. In the small open space in front of the massive gates of the fortress a wildly-excited rabble of negroes, lepers, filthy and ragged beggars, howling disciples of the prophets and the scum of the bazaars had gathered. Shrieks of rage and wild curses rose above the general tumult, and stones were beginning to fly. Eight or ten Egyptians with their backs against the heavy gates, were keeping the crowd at bay with their short swords. Angry shouts and exclamations were heard on all sides. “Death to the cat-worshippers! Sons of Shame! Cut out their tongues! Send them back to Pharaoh, the Father of Lies! Stone them!”

A burly and bearded Phœnician fish-porter bent down and threw a handful of dirt straight in the face of the Egyptian leader, who had cleared a narrow circle with his sword and was shouting imperiously to the soldiers on the towers.

“Shoot, dogs! Shoot!”

A volley of arrows from the tops of the two towers laid low a number of men, and Amon, drawing his sword and calling upon his two officers, rushed at the crowd and flung men to right and left as if they had been children. A huge Ethiopian slipped by him and

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sprang at the Egyptian, whirling a great wooden club. With a lightning-like stroke Nefer-ra struck the weapon out of his hand, and before the negro could recover himself a second savage slash nearly severed his head from his body. He fell like a log and the blood spurted from his neck as if from a fountain. Leaping lightly over the body, the Egyptian, livid with rage, confronted the Prince, while the others, babbling excitedly, gathered round their leader.

"Can you not hold your people better in hand, Prince Amon? Is it the custom in Judah to let this carrion"—he interrupted himself to bestow a contemptuous kick on the Ethiopian's body—"howl and bite like dogs at the gates of your palaces?"

"Your country promises too much and does too little, Lord! Egypt drove us to resist Assyria, and now that Assyria is at the gates your people are still in their own country, Lord Nefer-ra! That is why the rabble murmur instead of fawning upon you like dogs as they have done for many months past. As for this carrion," continued the Prince, pointing at the negro's body with a smile, "you treat it with more respect in Mizraim than we in Judah." The Egyptian shrugged his shoulders with an exclamation of impatience.

"The son of Ra—may he live through eternity!—will move when the appointed time comes, and not before. Have your people not been told of the message that arrived this morning? His Holiness is even now at Zalu on the frontier! Soon the King of Melukha with his armies will join him and they will advance into Judah, scattering the Assyrians before them like chaff before the wind! Assyria shall feel the might of the Land of Khem, and perhaps," he added, as if by an afterthought, "perhaps by then

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your countrymen and their allies may succeed in checking the progress of Assyria somewhat."

A large number of soldiers and officers had in the meantime come out of the fortress, and shouts of scornful laughter greeted the words of Nefer-ra, for not a shred of belief was left in Jerusalem in the promised help of Egypt. The populace talked openly of "Egypt-the-sit-still!" As for the Prince, he started angrily at the sneering words and tones of the Egyptian. A dangerous glitter came into his eyes, his hand involuntarily tightened on his sword-hilt, and for a moment he nearly forgot that Nefer-ra was doubly sacred as envoy of the Pharaoh of Bubastis and as a guest of the King of Judah.

"You are right, Lord! We have yet to show what we can do! If King Sennacherib besieges this city, let us hope that the son of Ra, and his master, the King of Cush, will move quickly enough to rescue you and all his faithful servants from the clutches of the Assyrians if we fail in our duty to our guests!"

"Even so, Prince!" retorted the Egyptian, "and your task shall be a still harder one. The messengers sent from Zalu by His Holiness—may he live through eternity!—captured some Assyrian scouts, and if they speak truly of the talk at Lachish the Great King will ask for a jewel which you prize far above gold or silver!"

Amon started involuntarily at these words, but the cold expressionless features of the Egyptian remained impenetrable.

"Enough of talking!" cried the Prince roughly. "If Ashur would wear priceless jewels, let him first take the casket that holds them!" And pushing angrily past the Egyptians he passed into the fortress

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which served as a barracks for the Hebrew palace guards. Two or three officers tried to detain him with questions, but he answered vaguely and did not stop until he had reached the little stone-paved and sparsely-furnished room in the heart of the fortress where he usually slept.

Nefer-ra's words had roused an intense agitation within his mind, for he could not help reading into them a sinister allusion to a secret which he thought hidden within his innermost soul. For the first time in his thirty years of existence a woman had taken full possession of his heart, and the vision of her slender shape rose up continually before his eyes, blunting the rough joys which, until then, had been as the salt of life to him.

Ever since he had reached adolescence Prince Amon had devoted himself to the profession of arms with his whole heart and soul, and had attained to great distinction in it. He had no thought for anything else. He was a spear turned into a man, as merciless as its iron-tipped point and as unerring as its flight. Under his leadership the Hebrew soldiers had carried fire and sword across the Shephelah and added to the Crown of Judah those very Philistine cities which the Assyrians were now laying waste. Unlike most of the luxurious members of the Royal House, he felt more at home in his goat's-hair tent than amid the luxuries of the harem, and fighting meant more to him than feasting. Women had occupied a very small place in his hard and stern soldier's life, though many had poured out a full meed of passion before the shrine of his splendid manhood. But always, whether it were the delicately-nurtured daughter of some Philistine merchant-prince, or some gazelle-like Bedawi

maiden that had succeeded in rousing his sleeping senses for a little while, the pleasure of their caresses soon palled upon him, and he relegated them to the guardianship of eunuchs amid the gilded ease of one of his numerous palaces.

A chance meeting in the Temple had turned Amon from a living instrument of war and carnage into a man. He had gazed into the sombre depths of the Princess Nehushta's eyes; their hidden fires had kindled an overwhelming passion within his iron soul and the fangs of Ashtoreth's serpents had begun to instil a subtle poison into his blood. No longer did he feel the same keen pleasure in the mad onslaught on some Philistine stronghold amid the splendours of the breaking dawn. No longer did the hand of Jahveh descend upon him to bathe his soul in a savage ecstasy and lead him first to the terrible ascent of the scaling-ladders to face a deadly shower of flaming arrows, stones, javelins and boiling pitch. Amid the wildest mêlée he saw Nehushta's eyes in the glitter of the lance-heads. In the camp he heard her voice in the calls of the sentinels, and often at night he would awake trembling and fancy he saw her standing by the side of his couch, clothed in starry light like the Queen of Heaven.

He had seen her first at the time of the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the month of Nisan. He was in command of the Royal Guards at the King's Gate when she passed into the Temple Court surrounded by her maidens. The glance of her great dark eyes and the perfume exhaled by her beautiful, lithe body as she brushed past him made him forget to give the signal for the royal salute until one of his wondering officers touched his arm. A few

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days later, while he was passing the outer gates of the Palace gardens, a woman's sudden cry of distress roused his attention. Dashing quickly into the maze of flower-beds, shady pathways and fountains, he had come upon a little bower surrounded by a thick cactus hedge. The young princess, paralysed with fear, stood in the midst of it, gazing at a deadly horned snake which lay coiled up close to the hedge. Its head swayed slowly to and fro, and its filmy eyes were steadily fixed on the terror-stricken girl.

With a bound Amon leapt forward and before the deadly reptile had time to strike, he crushed its head into the dust with his heel. For a few moments Nehushta could scarcely speak. Frightened by her deadly pallor and obeying a sudden impulse, the Prince took her in his arms and chafed her ice-cold hands. A great shiver ran through him as he felt her slender form yield to his grasp, and her head fall back against his breast. A heavy, langorous perfume of mingled myrrh and roses was wafted from her body. Instinctively Amon plucked a few blossoms from the cluster of wild jessamine that glittered snowily among the thick ebony coils of her hair, kissed them and placed them inside the breast of his tunic. The colour crept slowly back into the young girl's face, and, seized with a sudden confusion, she slipped out of his arms and fled as swiftly as a young gazelle.

He had seen her many times since then in the Palace and in the Temple, at feasts and at festivals, and though he had striven to hide his passion, the Egyptian's words made him wonder whether he had unwittingly betrayed himself by word or look. A great fear came upon him now lest Jahveh should dash the cup of happiness out of his hands ere he had set it to his lips,

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and he determined to seize the earliest opportunity of declaring his love to Nehushta and taking her to wife. It seemed to him as if Jahveh had put this great love into his heart as a means of saving Judah from disruption, if indeed Judah could be saved from the clutches of Assyria. For the King had no son, and at his death a struggle for the crown among his kinsmen, the B'ne-David, was inevitable. Assyria would again seize the opportunity to interfere and would quickly put an end to the B'ne-David and to Judah. What could be more fitting than that Prince Amon, chief among the B'ne-David, and loyal supporter of King Hezekiah, should wed his only daughter!

And as for this present danger of Assyria, though compromise and surrender were alien to his nature, Amon was too good a soldier not to realize both the hopelessness of resisting Assyria and the wisdom which had prompted his royal kinsman at the last hour to sue for peace and to offer tribute to the boundless greed of Assyria. There was not much doubt in his mind that as the Great King had come, so he would go, if he were offered treasure enough in the shape of gold, silver, and cattle. And the designs of Assyria against Egypt, which were becoming every year more evident, would be better and more quickly furthered by keeping a faithful vassal in Jerusalem, for the Assyrian strategists knew well enough that the capture of the city, on account of the enormous strength conferred upon it by its position and by the lack of water in its surroundings, would mean a three or four years' siege and would cost numberless lives. And they knew, too, that they could not afford to leave such a constant menace untaken on their flank.

As for the "jewel more precious than gold or silver,"

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there was only one thing in Jerusalem to which this description could be applied in Amon's eyes, and he felt that he could not too soon possess the right to defend it.

CHAPTER II

THERE was high feasting and deep drinking in the Palace of the Kings of Judah. The hangings of Sidonian purple had been removed from one side of the Hall of Rejoicing, and beyond the great archways the radiant moon poured down a flood of silvery light on the marble-paved Palace Court across whose glittering surface the black shadows of hurrying slaves and attendants darted to and fro like fantastic reptiles. Inside the Hall hundreds of little lamps, suspended from the arms of giant candelabra of bronze, threw their yellow glare on a brilliant and varied scene.

In vain had King Hezekiah tried to avoid being present at a time which seemed more fitting for national mourning than for rejoicing. In vain had the Holy Prophet Isaiah thundered against the thoughtlessness and frivolity of the people of Jerusalem who spent their nights feasting on the housetops and failed utterly to realize the terrible plight of Judah. The will of many of the nobles, of the Court officials and of all those who still persisted in looking towards Egypt for help had proved too strong for him, and now the heavy-hearted monarch presided over the feast sitting on a raised throne of carved ebony. Around him the Princes of Judah, the Viziers, the captains, the priests and the nobles and a goodly

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number of their women, glittering with gold ornaments and attired in shining silks, sat or reclined at long, low tables laden with countless vessels of gold and silver and with a truly royal profusion of food.

The captains of the Carian guards were in full armour according to their custom, and their bulging bronze corselets and the nodding plumes on their helmets stood out here and there amid the many-coloured striped burnouses of the Arab Sheikhs, and the snowy garments of the priests. On a couch at the King's right hand reclined the Queen-Mother, the still handsome Abi, having by her side the Princess Nehushta. The Queen herself was absent, as her presence at such a promiscuous entertainment was contrary to the etiquette of the Court of Judah. Around them sat the Princes of the House of David, the chief officers of state and many military officers, who were gathered in Jerusalem for the defence of the Holy City after having unsuccessfully tried to resist the Assyrian hordes in the surrounding country. Among them were Achimelek-ben-Jotham, the King's uncle, a white-bearded veteran, and the hero of a hundred fights against the Philistines and the Syrians; and Theokhares, the golden-locked Greek captain of the Carian Guards, whom the people of Jerusalem, called "*Ha-yapheh*," "the Beautiful One."

The banquet had been long and varied. Shredded salt fish from Tyre, eggs beaten with oil and clives pickled in vinegar had been succeeded by roasted pigeons, partridges seasoned with cummin and mustard leaves, and all kinds of fowls. Whole kids and sheep stewed with gourds and lentils, and crushed wheat boiled with onions had followed, and been replaced by locusts cooked in boiled butter, and quails

stuffed with pistachio nuts. Finally slaves had brought in baskets of silver-work containing early figs, cakes of pressed raisins from Kir-hareseth, cakes of pressed dates from Damascus, and cakes made of dough mixed with honey and fried in oil. The very abundance of the food caused some comment among the more thoughtful of the guests, who felt anxious at the thought of the horrors of a possible famine if the Assyrians should besiege the city for three or four years as they had done to Samaria. The second part of the banquet, however, during which most of the wine was consumed, helped to dissipate the general feeling of restlessness and apprehension. Great bowls of cunningly-chased gold stood in front of the King's table. Into these the slaves poured the generous wines of Lebanon and Helbon, also a strong drink made by fermenting together honey, grapes and dates ; and pomegranate wine spiced with myrrh, cinnamon and coriander. Cupbearers dipped golden cups into these bowls and handed them round to the guests, and as cup after cup was filled and emptied the soldiers began to talk loudly and to boast of their valour and warlike deeds.

"A plague upon the Assyrians!" cried one of the Carian officers. "Even with the help of their gods horses will not climb walls! I will wager ten golden shekels that Sennacherib will think twice before he brings any of his cavalry into the Vale of Hinnom!"

"Better save thy gold!" sneered a Bedawi Sheikh, who had seldom tasted anything stronger than the milk of his goats and whose speech was thick with the fumes of the wine. "Thou wilt need it to save thy skull from the executioner's club." There was no love lost between the Carian Guards and the Arab

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mercenaries, for the former resented the presence in Jerusalem of any other foreign soldiers besides themselves.

“Head of a dog!” shouted the Carian, starting up furiously, “I will slit thy carcase like an overripe gourd!”

Drawing his sword he made a wild slash at the Bedawi, but in an instant Theokhares’ blade leapt forth and disarmed him.

“Peace, fool!” cried the Carian leader. “Will ye not have enough fighting soon that you must brawl in the presence of the King, our Lord, and of the King’s mother?” These words seemed to rouse another of the turbulent Bedawi Sheikhs.

“Give us women like the Lady Nehushta, O Father of Palaces!” he shouted, addressing himself to Eliakim-ben-Hilkiah, the Grand Vizier, “and the Children of the Desert will gladly shed their blood for the King thy Lord!”

Amon, who sat near the couch whereon the Princess Nehushta reclined, saw her flush on hearing her name on the lips of the drunken Sheikh, and rising up with an angry gesture amid the general confusion caused by the Arabs who had started a drunken and ineffectual struggle, he made a sign to some of the soldiers who stood on guard around the Hall, and who immediately removed the offending Sheikhs. A look of silent gratitude from Nehushta’s wonderful eyes rewarded Amon, and the glory of the young Princess’s beauty sent a thrill of passion to the innermost depths of his being.

The wavy masses of her nut-brown hair had been dressed according to the Phœnician fashion in a profusion of little curls held in place by jewelled pins and

surrounded by a double band of golden crescents drawn across her white forehead. Strands of pearls hung down each cheek, setting off its delicate pink colour, while her great dark eyes seemed to flash fire or to become soft and tender as a young gazelle's. A necklace of large beads of rock-crystal and agate, potent in procuring divine aid, encircled the slimmness of her throat. Her firm young breasts, whose rounded outline showed clearly through her garments, were supported by a richly-embroidered Babylonian girdle from which were suspended little golden boxes containing precious perfumes, a small mirror of burnished silver and a few amulets against the influence of evil demons.

A great longing came upon Amon as he gazed at the Princess. For a moment he closed his eyes, and his breast heaved with suppressed passion as his mind harked back to the brief moments when he had held her slender form within his arms. He felt that he could not brook another moment's delay. That very night he would endeavour to speak to Nehushta and would tell her of his all-consuming love. He would plead with her, assure himself that his passion was returned, and then speak boldly to the King himself. A meeting would be easy to arrange, for at the close of the banquet it was his duty to escort the Queen-Mother and the Princess to the House of the Women, and he could easily contrive to exchange a few words with Nehushta and ask her to meet him that night in the Palace gardens. The House of the Women formed the north-western angle of the Palace and it communicated with the outside world through three entrances. One gave access to a narrow enclosed court lying between the Palace and the outer Temple walls ; a second

communicated with the Hall of Rejoicing and the more public parts of the Palace; and a third opened into the Palace gardens. To these gardens there was but a single other entrance, a gate in the high stone wall which formed their southern boundary, and this gate was guarded day and night by two of Amon's own officers of the *Gibborim*.

The sudden sound of music interrupted the Prince's thoughts. Slaves had brought in brazen censers filled with live coals on which they scattered handfuls of costly spices from the Land of Punt. The dull thud of tambourines and the sharp tinkling of sistra mingled with the shrill sounds of flutes, the deep, vibrating tones of the ten-stringed *kinnor* and the mournful notes of the *nebel*, and out of the fragrant mist that had gradually filled the lower end of the Hall dancing-women from the Temple of Ashtoreth appeared as if by magic. They were chiefly Egyptians and Phœnicians, and every curve of their lissom bodies could be discerned through their diaphanous robes. Round their waists they wore thick twisted shawls of red and yellow-striped silk with fringes hanging down in front nearly to their bare feet, the toe-nails of which were dyed with henna. They advanced with rhythmical steps into the centre of the Hall, shaking sistra, thumping tambourines and clicking castanets. A dozen musicians followed them and squatted down on their haunches facing the royal throne, so as to form a wide semicircle inside which the dancers began to sway gracefully.

The instruments played in unison. *Kinnor*, *nebel* and flute gave forth a wild, haunting melody, while the rhythm was marked by the clashing of cymbals, the clapping of hands and the clicking of castanets.

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The dance at first was slow and measured, and as the women circled round each other with swaying hips and graceful movements of the arms the tinkle of the little bells on their silver anklets exercised a soothing influence on the guests. Amon could not help noticing that one of the dancers, a tall, slim girl with flashing black eyes whose face seemed familiar to him, endeavoured continually to get as near to him as the dance would allow, and at times he almost fancied that she was holding her arms out imploringly towards him. Gradually the music grew louder and quicker and the dance more animated, and just as it seemed to have reached its climax she plucked a rose from her hair and threw it in the direction of Amon. Laughingly the Prince was about to throw her some pieces of money, when a loud shouting arose in the outer court. Some of the soldiers sprang to their feet and grasped their swords. Here and there intoxicated guests sang meaningless words and swayed unsteadily as they tried to rise from their seats. At a sign from one of the chief eunuchs the dancing-women fled through the archways like a flock of chattering and affrighted birds, while the shouts grew louder and words began to be distinguishable. "Oi Yerushalaim!" (Woe to Jerusalem!) "Oi Beth-David!" (Woe to the House of David!)

Light fleecy clouds were passing across the moon, and by its fitful light slaves could be dimly seen struggling to keep back a great crowd that was pouring into the Palace through the porch leading into the outer court. Slave-masters yelled and laid about them with their whips; eunuchs and minor officials ran wildly to and fro like distracted ants, but could not prevent a few men getting by them. The line of guards outside

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the archways, however, stood firm like a wall of bronze, and the officer who commanded them only allowed three men to pass into the Hall itself. They were the messengers whom King Hezekiah had sent to the Assyrian camp at Lachish to sue for peace and to offer submission. Their garments were torn and travel-stained; they had removed their turbans and sprinkled ashes upon their hair, and on approaching the throne they rent their cloaks and prostrated themselves, touching the ground with their foreheads.

A number of the guests crowded round them and adjured them to speak. The King, who had half risen from his throne, sat down again and signed imperiously to one of the messengers to tell his tale. Abiathar-ben-Chenaniah, an elderly man, began to speak in a wailing voice, casting frightened glances around as if he still remembered some terrible sight.

“Live for ever, O Lion of Judah! We have looked upon the might of Assyria and our hearts are turned to water! May the curse of Jahveh fall upon Sennacherib and cause his flesh to rot upon his bones! For three days we waited upon his pleasure and only yesterday morning did he give us this message for thee, O Master. He is graciously pleased to accept thy offer to return to thy allegiance to Assyria, but thy annual tribute is doubled, and in addition thou must send three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold to the Royal Treasury at Nineveh.” A look of consternation was visible on the faces of some of the priests, who were the first to realize the hugeness of the sum demanded.

“He will permit thee to preserve the throne of thy fathers,” continued the messenger, “but he demands

that Padi, the King of Ekron, who is held prisoner within the Shadow of thy Glory, should be released and sent to Lachish." Abiathar suddenly stopped and a look of anguish passed over his features.

"He will not come near to Jerusalem, thy royal city, but thou must pay a heavy price for that mercy, O Gate of Wisdom !"

Instinctively Amon knew what the messenger's next words would reveal, and his heart beat wildly as he recalled the Egyptian's mysterious words of the previous day: "A jewel more precious than gold or silver !"

"Would that Jahveh might wither the tongue within my mouth," continued the messenger, "rather than it should give utterance to what I must say, O King ! Thine only child, the Lady Nehushta, shall be the price for Jerusalem ! She shall be sent first to the Great King at Lachish that he may have his pleasure of her, and then it is his intention to send her to the Temple of Ishtar at Erech, that she may serve the goddess as a *Kedeshah*."

A cry of anguish from the unhappy Princess broke the deep silence that greeted these words. Every drop of blood in Amon's body seemed to turn first to ice and then to fire. Nehushta, the beloved of his heart, shamed and humbled, the toy of the brutal conqueror's foul lust ! Nehushta, the peerless daughter of the Lion of Judah, the virgin hope of the House of David, to enter upon the *Kedeshah's* horrible and shameless life ! A cry of rage burst from the Prince's lips, and in spite of the cold, sneering gaze which Nefer-ra the Egyptian fixed mockingly upon him he strode forward into the centre of the Hall and faced the King with uplifted hand.

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“Son of David, let not this shame be put upon our royal house ! Wait but three days more, for peradventure Egypt may wake from her sloth ! Give me a few thousand of my trusty men and we will rush down from our mountains upon this ravening wolf of Assyria and tear him limb from limb ! ”

Shouts of approval rose on all sides, for never yet had Amon failed to perform what he had undertaken, but the King shook his head gently. The light of a sublime self-denial was already gleaming in his eyes, and Amon knew that the burning faith that dwelt in his kinsman's soul would not let him shrink before any sacrifice, however terrible, to save Judah and to keep the Name of Jahveh alive among the nations.

“O son of the House of David,” said the King, “well I know thy courage, and I doubt not that thou wouldst slay many thousands of the Assyrians, even though they are as the sands of the sea for number. But let not thy heart be dismayed because of this evil hour that hath befallen us. Jahveh, our God, is all-powerful, and in the end His Holy Name shall give us victory over the Assyrians, who are but men. Yet whatever path He shall appoint for me, thereon will I tread. To-morrow I shall hold audience with my Counsellors in the Hall of Judgment and there make known my will regarding the answer that shall be given to the King of Assyria. Be thou at my right hand then, O Son of the House of David, for perchance the Holy One of Israel shall show thee a better way.”

Silently Amon, the Grand Vizier, Ahimelech, Shebna, the High Priest and many officials went up to the throne and kissed the King on the right shoulder, each in turn repeating the consecrated words : “May Jahveh lengthen thy days, Son of David ! ” In a few

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moments the King withdrew into the inner apartments of the Palace, leaning on his favourite cupbearer Joab and escorted by the Carians. His exit was followed by a wild clamour of execration against Assyria, while Abiathar's words, passing from mouth to mouth, reached the excited multitudes in the outer courts of the Palace and spread rapidly throughout Jerusalem. Slave-masters with their long whips and door-keepers with ivory staves endeavoured to clear the inner court, while Amon's sharp words of command to his men rang out as he led them with drawn swords to the raised dais where Nehushta clung, weeping passionately, to her grandmother.

"Come, come, little daughter!" said the old Queen, attempting to console her, "be brave, for all is not yet lost! Perchance our good friend Amon will think of some way to save thee from this accursed Assyrian." The sympathy expressed in the old Queen's words and the quick glance of comprehension she gave Amon made him realize how badly indeed he must have guarded the secret of his love.

"Thou art right, O Mistress!" he said. "Let not the Lady Nehushta grieve overmuch, for there are those to whom her happiness is dearer than life itself. As for the way of help, mayhap Jahveh will disclose it to me, for He will surely not allow the wolf to mate with the Lion's offspring." The young girl raised her tear-stained features and gazed appealingly at him.

"Oh, my Lord Amon," she sobbed, "save me, I pray thee! Save me as thou didst save me from the deadly serpent!"

Her eyes grew wide with a nameless terror, and suddenly, as Amon's burning glance met hers, the know-

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ledge that she loved him with her whole soul broke upon her consciousness like an irradiating flood of rosy light, while the thought of the Assyrian King's contemptuous caresses made her flesh creep as if some noisome reptile were crawling over it. Sooner than become his toy and enter upon the Kedesah's abominable life she felt that she would willingly die a thousand times over. The Queen had stepped aside to speak to the High Priest Azariah, and Amon seized the opportunity to say what he wished to Nehushta.

"I swear it by the Glory of Jahveh, Princess! No cursed Assyrian dog, not even the Great King himself, shall ever take you to his couch while I live! When all are at rest to-night let one of your maidens bring you into the Palace gardens. Perchance Jahveh shall show me a way to save you from the King of Assyria without endangering the safety of Jerusalem." With a slight inclination of her head Nehushta signified her assent, but before she could utter any word of thanks the Queen had returned to her side, and immediately they left the Hall, followed by Amon and his men and preceded by half a dozen negro slaves bearing torches.

They passed down the lofty apartment and through the last archway into a colonnaded porch surrounding the inner court. Thence through a great gateway flanked by two bronze lions into a long, stone-paved passage in the middle of which two doors of carved ivory faced each other. A slave struck a silver plate hanging beside the right-hand door, which immediately opened. The Chief Eunuch, a fat, beardless Aramæan clothed in gaudy blue and green and wearing a huge scimitar at his side, greeted them obsequiously, and his first chattering remarks disclosed the fact that the evil news

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brought by the messengers from Lachish had already reached him. As soon as the two women had disappeared behind the doorway after bidding Amon farewell, the Prince and his men crossed the outer Palace court into their barracks in the Millo.

CHAPTER III

AMON returned to the fortress with his brain on fire and distraught with grief at the awful destiny which threatened the woman he loved. He wanted to be alone, so that he might try to think out some plan or devise some scheme to save Nehushta, and his soul rebelled at the thought of the numerous duties he still had to perform. A great activity and confusion reigned inside the fortress in spite of the lateness of the hour. Officers crowded round him asking for orders or information; scouts came in continually from the surrounding country and made their reports to him; sundry prisoners were brought in to be executed or imprisoned in the dungeons beneath the fortress, for a good many wandering Bedawin from the desert were much addicted to spying, and all such met with short shrift. Among the prisoners was one Bedawi who demanded insistently to be brought before Amon, to whom he said he wished to impart some valuable information. The Prince gave orders accordingly, and a few minutes later some soldiers led into his room a tall thin man whose whole face was veiled with the exception of the dark and piercing eyes. Amon spoke coldly and sharply to him. "What news have you, O spy?"

"I am no spy, Lord Amon," replied the man,

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drawing himself up proudly and tearing aside with a sudden movement the veil that covered his face.

"By Jahveh," exclaimed Amon, "'tis Amru, the Sheikh of the Children of Jeruel! How come you here?"

"O Prince! Amru has not forgotten that when his life was in your hands you gave it back to him. The men of my tribe have heard that the Sons of Judah are hard pressed by a powerful foe and I know that many of my brethren are here in Jerusalem ready to fight for Judah. Let it not be said that the Sheikh of the Children of Jeruel was wanting in gratitude! I came but to tell thee that five hundred men of our tribe who are now encamped in the Wilderness below Tekoa are ready to fight by thy side. Because I came alone thy officers would not believe me, and accused me of being a spy."

For a few moments Amon did not reply. His eyes gazed into the distance almost as if he had not heard the Bedawi's words. For in that instant a flash of inspiration had been vouchsafed to him; a thought holding the possibility of saving the Princess Nehushta in her great extremity had been born within his brain. Dismissing the soldiers so that he might be alone with Amru, he explained eagerly to the Sheikh the terrible fate that threatened the woman whom he had come to love more than life itself, and in a few words he outlined a daring plan to save her which had been suggested by the words of the Sheikh himself. When Amru at last left him, free to return to his people, it seemed to Amon that the mighty hand of Jahveh Himself had been stretched out to lift a great burden from his heart.

An hour later he wrapped himself in his long military

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cloak, exchanged his helmet for the leather cap adorned with two long horsehair tassels which constituted the ordinary soldier's headdress, and went down into the royal enclosure. He walked along in the shadow of the walls until he reached a marble stairway, at the top of which was the single entrance in the southern boundary wall of the Palace gardens. At the foot of the steps two of his officers stood on guard, and failing to recognize him in the darkness, they challenged him.

"The Sword of Jahveh smites," said Amon, giving the password.

"May'st thou ever wield it, Lord!" replied the officers, standing aside.

The Prince passed through a small arch of carven stone, over which clambered wild vines and passion-flowers, and found himself in a Paradise of luxuriant vegetation. The Egyptian Princess whom King Solomon had wedded had brought many Egyptian gardeners to Jerusalem in her train, and their ingenuity and resources had created this beautiful garden on the barren slopes of Mount Moriah. Two centuries later King Uzziah had so much enlarged and beautified it that it was commonly known as "King Uzziah's Garden." Trees, shrubs and flowers had been brought from far countries to adorn it. Rain-water, collected in great stone tanks close to the outer Temple walls, was distributed through cunningly-contrived channels so as to bring grateful shade and greenness to its pathways and bowers even at the hottest seasons of the year.

The moon's rays cast long, black shadows from the trees as Amon walked slowly down a winding path bordered by ever-green pomegranate trees and sycamores. Climbing roses twined round their stems, while

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hedges of magnolia in full bloom, tuberose and snow-white jessamine filled the hot, still air with their heavy and sensuous perfume. Everywhere the cold blue and green radiance of countless fireflies glittered around him. Through clearings in the trees the flare of torches on the distant roofs of the Upper City marked the spots where groups of wild revellers prolonged their festivities far into the watches of the night. The cicadas on the branches and the great black crickets in the bushes gave forth their sharp continuous notes, and at intervals the long, sonorous call of the sentinels on the Palace towers answered the faint challenge of the watching priests on the Temple pylons.

The pathway ended in a little bower, where Amon had crushed the serpent. He looked around him, but could see no one in the uncertain light, and for a moment he feared lest some unforeseen circumstance should have prevented the Princess from keeping her word. But suddenly a slight, girlish form, all wrapped in white, darted across a moonlit patch of ground into the shadow of the bower, and Nehushta stood by his side. She was alone, and as Amon led her to a stone seat, he gently chided her for having come unaccompanied.

"Nay, my Lord," she answered, in the sweet, mellow tones that were as music to his heart, "it is better so. See, I have donned the cloak of one of my maidens and taken off my armlets and anklets lest the sound of their tinkling should betray me. Two eunuchs in the garden mocked at me, mistaking me for one of my maidens. They tried to tear my veil aside, and cried, 'Doth Miriam seek a lover?' But I tore myself from their grasp and ran hither."

The hot blood sang in Amon's ears, and a great

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wave of happiness seemed to flow over him as he leaned over Nehushta and listened to her words. The intoxicating perfume of her hair made him dizzy, and he seized her little hands in his and covered them with fiery and passionate kisses which the Princess struggled gently to avoid.

“A lover, indeed, sweet kinswoman, though you did not know it ! For it was not only to tell you of deliverance from Assyria that I asked you to meet me to-night, but also to tell you of the love that is consuming my heart. Nehushta, speak to me ! Daughter of David, tell your slave that he has found favour in your eyes !”

A gentle sigh escaped from the Princess's lips as she released her hands and drew aside the gauzy veil that half hid her features.

“Alas, my Lord ! If report speak truly, though many women have loved you, your love for them is but a light thing, easily thrown aside. And why speak of love to me, when you know that soon I shall be torn away from all I hold dearest ! If indeed you love me, then never let me go forth again from this garden, but plunge your dagger into my breast !”

She half turned and placing her hands on Amon's shoulders, gazed entreatingly up into his eyes. His heart beat so fiercely at her touch that he fancied she must hear it. His breath came in hurried gasps and he had to exercise an almost superhuman control not to take her in his arms and crush her to him in a supreme embrace.

“Little one ! Life of my heart ! Let your tears cease to flow ! For I swear to you, O Nehushta, by Jahveh's Holy Ark, that before two days have passed you shall be safe !” His voice was hoarse with re-

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pressed passion as he uttered this oath that none of the B'ne-David had ever been known to break. "May I lie unburied in the Vale of Hinnom for carrion crows to feed on if I fail you !"

"Oh, kinsman," cried the Princess, with a touch of hope in her voice, "how gladly would I believe and trust in you ! But how shall this thing be ? You know well that though my father loves me as the apple of his eye, yet he loves Jahveh more, and he dare not refuse the Great King's request, lest Judah be destroyed as was Samaria."

"Have no fears, Flower of the Dawn ! He shall not refuse you, and yet you shall not suffer. You shall indeed go forth with the gifts of treasure to Lachish, but you will never reach it to become the toy of Sen-nacherib. One thing only I ask of you in return, O Sweet Mistress of my Soul ! Plight your troth to me ! Let me be your Lord and your beloved ! For your beauty has enslaved me, so that I cannot sleep or eat or drink, and there is no joy left for me in the fierce battle ! The sound of your voice in my ears is like the sound of running water to the desert traveller ; for the flame of your kiss I would give up life itself !"

Nehushta did not answer at once. The Prince's eyes seemed to flash with fire in the darkness, and had iron bands encircled his mighty chest, the tension of his muscles would have burst them asunder. Hotter and more passionate words poured forth from his lips. His arm encircled her supple waist, and her head fell back on his breast, pillowed amid the ebony wealth of her hair. Amon bent forward as if to drink from her very lips the answering words of love for which his soul thirsted.

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"Oh, Amon, beloved," she whispered, "though it be a shame for a maiden and a King's daughter to yield at the first onset, ever since I saw you in the Temple you have held my heart in the hollow of your hands! Do what you will with me, Amon! my King and my Lord to whom I am henceforth betrothed!" Amon bent still lower and crushed her lips with his own.

Everywhere around them the universe vibrated with the throb of passion. The soft notes of the bulbul re-echoed the deathless song of the nightingale, while a thousand mingled perfumes, sensuous and heavy, assailed their senses. The soft rustling of the trees seemed to whisper of love, and myriads of stars set in the sombre canopy of heaven glittered like jewels above them. The low, mew-like cry of an owl in a bush brought them back once more to consciousness of the outer world, and Amon, holding Nehushta closely pressed to his heart, began eagerly to explain to her the plan he had formed for her deliverance.

"To-morrow, when the King holds audience in the Hall of Judgment, let Hadad, the Chief Eunuch, come before him and let him speak thus: 'Behold, O King, Nehushta thy daughter hath taken counsel of the night and she doth willingly offer herself as a peace-offering between thee and the King of Assyria.' Thus a rumour of your willingness to give yourself to the Great King will spread throughout the land until it reaches the Assyrian camp, and whatever comes about Sennacherib will not be able to accuse the King your father of bad faith. Within two days the King of Ekron and the Messengers with gifts will set forth. You may accompany them with a glad heart, O Sweet Giver of Delights, for you will be treading the path

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that leads to deliverance ! ” An exclamation of bewilderment rose to Nehushta’s lips.

“ The path of deliverance, Amon ? Long before we reach Lachish we shall be in the midst of the Assyrian bands that are swarming over Judah ! ”

“ Even so, my beloved ; but listen and you shall understand what I have devised to save you. You know that I have often warred against the Bedawin, the Children of the Desert, and that to them I am known as ‘ The Sword of Jahveh. ’ You know also that two years ago, driven by hunger and a fierce drought, the Children of Jeruel came up from the wilderness into the high lands and took the city of Tekoa. I was sent to drive them forth and in a few days scattered them like chaff before the wind. On the last day of the fighting as they fled in confusion down the vine-clad slopes towards the Salt Sea, Amru, their Sheikh, stumbled and fell so that he lay at my mercy. A sudden impulse held back my sword from his breast, and that day Amru swore that the life I had spared should be mine to take or to leave, swore that my lightest wish should be as the command of his God. To-night, before I came into this garden, Amru was brought before me as a prisoner, having been taken for a spy. He is no spy, Nehushta, for he came to offer the King his help and that of his brethren who number half a thousand. And then it was that Jahveh, who must have guided Amru’s steps, opened my understanding so that I knew the way to save you. Near Hebron, the first halting place on the way to Lachish, the Children of Jeruel, who know every secret pathway in Judah, will attack your caravan, and carry you off. They will disguise you as one of their women and bring you back at once to Jerusalem, where they will be

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expected and where it will be easy to smuggle you back into the Palace at night."

Nehushta clapped her hands with delight at the prospect of being saved, but suddenly her joy vanished.

"But what of Sennacherib? When the Messengers arrive at Lachish and tell him what has happened will he not in his rage put them to death, break faith with my father and attack our Holy City?"

"Ask me no more now, Nehushta, beloved of my soul; and above all, do not whisper one word of this scheme to any one. One shall be found in Jerusalem to take your place when the time comes, and so soon as she is found I will send you a message of comfort!"

"You are wise as the serpent and brave as the lion, O my beloved! Would the time were already here when you shall call me wife before Jahveh!"

A deep thrill vibrated through every fibre of the Prince's being as he heard the avowal of Nehushta. Slowly he fell on to his knees before the stone bench on which she sat, his arms encircling her slender waist and his head resting on her heaving bosom. "Soon, soon may it be, O Mistress of my Life! Fountain of hidden Desires!" A little, joyous laugh rippled from Nehushta's lips as her slim fingers toyed with the dark ringlets of Amon's hair.

"Will you tell the King, my father, of our love soon, or will you forget me as men say you have forgotten so many others, O Amon?"

"Forget you, little one! May my right hand first forget how to wield a sword! Listen, beloved! I too shall accompany your caravan, and as soon as you have been taken by the Children of Jeruel I shall make haste to return to Jerusalem, leaving the Messengers to proceed by themselves to Lachish. I shall go

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straightway to the King, my kinsman, and tell him how I have contrived to save you from the Assyrian's clutches to be a joy and a comfort to his old age, and how you have bestowed the priceless gift of your love upon me. If I have not already done so, O Nehushta, it has been because of the sore straits of Judah. You have no brother, and your husband may one day be King over Judah, so that I feared to bespeak you lest I should bring about more quarrels among our kinsmen, the B'ne-David, each one of whom thinks himself entitled to your father's throne. Already there are too many divided counsels and traitors within our walls. Instead of seeking to bring defeat and confusion upon the ruthless foe who is grinding Judah into the earth with his heel, we flutter to and fro like silly doves between Egypt and Assyria, until our name has become a mockery and a byword from Edom to Damascus ! But now that I am assured of your love, O Nehushta, I fear nothing ! ”

A little sigh of happy content escaped her, and his lips once more sought hers in a long kiss, which sealed the gift of their souls into each other's keeping. They rose at last, and wandered slowly up the dark pathway, hand in hand, like two children in an enchanted wood. The deep silence around them was broken at intervals by the distant baying of the bands of savage dogs that roamed through the city at night. The moon had sunk beneath the horizon and the darkness was only relieved by the shimmering brightness of the fireflies and the fitful glare of the torches on the distant house roofs. But neither Amon nor Nehushta heard or saw anything, for a new and brighter radiance had entered into their souls, transfiguring the whole of the universe with the sweetness and brightness of its light.

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They parted with a last embrace at the end of the pathway, and Amon stood for a few moments watching Nehushta as she sped lightly back along the path, and was swallowed up in the darkness. Slowly the Prince retraced his steps to the little embowered archway. At the foot of the marble stairs the two *Gibborim*, silent and bronze-clad, saluted him with their spears as he passed.

CHAPTER IV

THAT same night the King had sought counsel in vain from all sides. Messengers were dispatched hotfoot to the Holy Prophet Isaiah, only to return with a cryptic message which none could interpret. The Grand Vizier, Eliakim-ben-Hilkiah, Prince Amon, and all the Princes of the B'ne-David, Theokhares, and even the discredited Shebna, the Keeper of the Documents, all had been summoned to the inner apartments of the Palace; but their counsels gave him no guidance. "Yield to Assyria!" said some. "Nay, Lord, resist to the death, and trust in Egypt," said others.

And now Hezekiah lay upon his couch tossing in sleepless grief, while his love for Nehushta and his love for his God struggled for the mastery within his soul. If he listened to his love for Nehushta, he would risk everything on a last throw, defy Assyria, and trust to the promised intervention of Egypt and the Arabian Princes. But the fate of Samaria rose up before him like some dread spectre. Twenty short years had elapsed since its fall, and the seed of Israel had been cut off for ever. Their land was filled with all manner of strangers and abominations, and Nergal, Nebo, Ashur, and foul Ishtar found thousands of worshippers where once the worship of Jahveh, less pure than in Judah, it is true, and degraded by the presence of

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golden bull-images, had reigned supreme. And now Jahveh's remaining stronghold, Jerusalem the Holy, the Temple built by the greatest of the B'ne-David, King Solomon, the Temple wherein stood the Holy Ark, all were threatened with the same dire fate. The all-conquering Assyrians would destroy them as ruthlessly as they had destroyed Samaria and its shrines, and a thousand other cities and their temples. The name of Jahveh, Jahveh in whom the King had come to see not only the God of Judah, but the all-supreme Creator of the heavens and the earth, would disappear from Jerusalem as it had disappeared from Samaria.

On the other hand, if he yielded, if he followed the counsels of the Holy Prophet, whose teaching had always been that Judah must be content with political submission to Assyria, how dark the future seemed ! He would have to face his own terrible grief at the loss and degradation of his only beloved child ; the lack of a direct heir might entail quarrels at his death that would end in the break-up of Judah ; the greater part of the Temple treasures would be swallowed up to pay the enormous tribute demanded by Assyria ; and finally his miserable people would be still further crushed beneath an ever-growing load of taxation.

The little dim light that burnt in a corner of the room before the shrines of the Teraphim, the gods of the hearth, threw grotesque shadows on the cedar beams of the ceiling and on the ivory panels of the walls. Sleep fled from the King's weary soul, and his thoughts grew dark and bitter. Strange, sad musings, the mental heritage of his blood-stained and worn-out dynasty, stirred within his mind. The air seemed to grow hotter and more oppressive, and at last the fancy seized

him to walk a while in the Great Court of the Palace and to rest by the side of the cool and canopied marble basin that lay in its midst. Followed by Joab, his faithful cupbearer, who slept always stretched outside his master's door, he wandered through the many rooms and passages of the Palace until he reached the Great Court through the Southern Gate. The moon had sunk and everything lay in darkness. On the extreme north-west of the Court stood the small palace which had been built by King Solomon for his Egyptian wife. A solitary light gleamed through one of the upper casements, and the sight of it brought other and still more dreaded thoughts to the King's mind, so that for a moment he felt tempted to fly back to the shelter of his chamber. For in that Palace, for thirty-five long years, there had dwelt one whose face he had never gazed upon ; one who had been allowed to live on because men feared the madness wherewith Jahveh had clouded her mind ; one whose name was Orpah, Princess of Moab and Queen of Judah.

She had been the first and favourite wife of his father King Ahaz, until the day when his senses became enslaved by the beautiful Abi, the mother of King Hezekiah. A year after Abi's entrance into the harem a deed of horror had taken place in Jerusalem ; a deed the recollection of which caused the King to shudder. Then also the Holy City lay quailing under the menace of an attack by the combined forces of the Kings of Israel and of Damascus. And King Ahaz, not content with calling upon Assyria for help, against the advice of the Holy Prophet Isaiah, had taken his first-born son, the child of Queen Orpah, and had caused him to be slain and burnt with fire in the Valley of Hinnom to gain the favour and protection of

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his God, Javeh Ha-Melek, the Heavenly King. To make the sacrifice truly efficacious the parents of the doomed victim were forced to make a pretence of willingness. Dry-eyed and with heaving bosom Queen Orpah had stood silently outside the Dung Gate at the Tophet or Furnace and watched her child, the flesh of her flesh, being laid upon the altar of logs which had been built in the Accursed Place. But the sight of the black-robed priest drawing the shining sacrificial knife across its white throat had roused her out of her stupor. She struggled furiously in the grasp of two Syrian eunuchs, who prevented her from throwing herself into the raging flames, and madness came upon her that day. The terrified and superstitious Ahaz had put her away and let her live in the House of the Daughter of Pharaoh, where none ever saw her and none dared to put an end to her misery.

Hezekiah stood silently for a little while. Horrible thoughts forced themselves on his mind. He wondered shudderingly how far his father's real motive had been to gain the favour of Jahveh by sacrificing what he should have prized more than life itself and how far his terrible deed had been prompted by the wish that his kingdom should descend to himself, the newly-born offspring of the beautiful Abi, rather than to the child of a Princess whom he had ceased to love. He could not, he dare not judge his own dead father ! With a groan of horror he hid his face in his hands and murmured a few words of prayer with which he sought to put to flight the terrible images that rose within his fevered brain.

"Master ! Lord ! what aileth thee ? " asked Joab anxiously ; but the King waved him aside and groaned aloud, for a strange and awful desire had taken pos-

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session of his tortured soul. For the first time he wished that he might gaze upon the face of the woman whose child had been torn from her in a way perhaps not more terrible than the way in which his own beloved child must now be torn from him if Judah were to be saved.

"Joab," he whispered, as if afraid of hearing his own words, "I would behold the Queen Orpah. Go, rouse one of her attendants."

The cupbearer, seeing his master's agitated state, tried in vain to dissuade him, but was forced at last to obey his commands, and walked quickly towards the house. He disappeared through the outer gateway, which was ajar, and came back in a little while followed by two frightened slaves: an old, bent woman holding a smoky torch and a youngish man with a broken nose and an evil leer upon his hideous face.

"Queen Orpah sleeps, Lord!" said Joab, "and they fear to wake her, for when she wakes in the middle of the night she grows restless and often orders her slaves to be beaten."

"No matter," said the King imperiously, "lead me to her chamber and let me gaze upon her while she sleeps."

They passed down a short arched passage with a turn in it, and through two courts until they reached a small, inner court in an angle of which a flight of stone steps led to an upper gallery, with a balustrade and pillars running round the court. Hezekiah took the torch from the old woman, and drawing aside a curtain entered one of the rooms opening out of this gallery. This room, which was the one in which the old Queen usually slept, was in total darkness, and by the fitful light of the smoky torch the King distin-

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guished a figure stretched out on a low divan. Slowly he approached until he could discern the features of the sleeping queen. A thrill of horror ran through his veins as he gazed on her ravaged face. She appeared old, terribly old and emaciated, with sharp nose and chin and deeply-sunken eye-pits, and her skin, which was of a dark olive colour, looked still darker by contrast with the masses of snow-white hair which framed it. One thin, almost claw-like hand lay outside the coverlet, and by her side lay a rough wooden doll, richly attired.

A feeling of profound pity stirred the King's heart. He had never given anything but passing thoughts to the old Queen, whom no one ever saw, and now for the first time his own grief made him realize acutely some part of the sorrow that must have wrecked the life of the once beautiful Moabite Princess. The feeble light of the torch reached the sleeper's consciousness; she moved uneasily, her hand picked at the coverlet, and awaking suddenly she raised herself, and looked wildly around, her great, deep-sunken eyes looking like two burning fires in the semi-darkness. Her glance fell upon the King, and with a scream like that of some wounded and terrified animal, she hugged the doll to her breast, and held one hand to her eyes as if to shut out some horrible vision. "O Chemosh! God of my fathers!" she cried, "suffer not Ahaz my husband to haunt me even in my sleep!" Her voice sounded thin and quavering, and the look of deadly hatred which she turned upon Hezekiah made him instinctively draw back a step.

"O Ahaz!" continued the Queen, "murderer of thy own flesh! Canst thou never leave me in peace? Is it not enough for thee to have torn the fruit of my

entrails from me ? Must thy anger be as a curse to me in the night ? Have pity, O husband more cruel than death ! ” she entreated with heart-breaking accents. “ Look upon this wasted bosom upon which thou once didst sleep ! Have I not given enough to appease the anger of thy God ? What more doth He require of me ? ” and she hugged the wretched wooden doll still closer to her breast and rocked herself to and fro in an agony of terror and despair.

Instantly Hezekiah had realized the delusion under which the broken and insane Queen was labouring : a delusion fostered by his own remarkable likeness to his father King Ahaz, for whose spirit she mistook him.

“ Peace be upon thee, O Queen ; and may Jahveh give peace to thy troubled soul ! Thou dost not gaze upon the spirit of Ahaz, my father—peace be upon him !—who dwelleth in Sheol, but upon his miserable son whom Jahveh hath seen fit to punish.”

As Hezekiah uttered the words “ my father ” an awful change came over the Queen. She sprang erect, threw the doll upon the divan and stood like a fury incarnate with hands raised above her head. The look of horror and misery upon her features changed to one of insane and demoniacal joy, and for a few moments the violence of her passion was such that she could only utter meaningless sounds, until of a sudden something seemed to be released within her.

“ O Chemosh ! ” she cried, “ Great Chemosh ! I thank thee for letting me live to see this day ! This day when the son of mine enemy is accursed of his own God ! O Great Chemosh ! May Thy most potent curse fall upon this man and turn his bones to rottenness ! ” She pointed at the terrified Hezekiah, who had retreated almost to the doorway and yet

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seemed unable to leave the room, as if he were fascinated by the force of her burning hatred.

“May'st thou die like a dog, thou son of a harlot!” raved the old woman. “Cursed be thy father in his grave! May thy mother lie unburied for jackals to feed upon! Cursed be the House of David in their going in and their coming out! I have been told that thou hast a daughter beautiful to look upon! May her beauty fade in a night and her flesh rot upon her bones and may she be defiled by black slaves!” Her voice rose to a wild shriek and she fell back upon the couch, exhausted, convulsed with rage and foaming at the mouth. Joab and the frightened slaves rushed into the room, and while the latter attended to their mistress the cupbearer helped the stricken King to return to his apartments.

This terrible scene and the old Queen's curses had affected him deeply, and the bitterness of his grief became almost unbearable. He dismissed the faithful Joab, and once more he fell to turning and tossing upon his couch, waiting for the dawn, which seemed as if it would never come. With tears and breaking heart Hezekiah the King humbled himself before Jahveh in the solitude of his chamber and prayed for a sign. His eyes were fixed upon the little lamp which still burned before the images of the Teraphim, and as he gazed at it the light from it seemed to grow brighter and to expand into a fiery cloud, which gradually grew larger and larger until it nearly filled the whole chamber. And in the cloud there passed before his eyes the shapes of his long-dead fathers the Kings of Judah. The sound of rushing wind and of beating wings filled the air around him, and in it he could distinguish the words which their voices whispered in his ears from the dim

depths of Sheol. The king did not sleep, nor was he awake, yet in some dim way he knew that Jahveh was about to vouchsafe to him the sign he had prayed for.

David the Shepherd, brilliant captain and outlaw, servant of Jahveh and voluptuous Sultan, cowered before the avenging form of Uriah the Hittite, whose lips breathed a malediction: "Accursed be the seed of Bathsheba the Adulteress!" Solomon passed by in glittering robes of gold, the royal mitre upon his head and the sceptre in his hand, and on his features there was a bitter smile that seemed to say: "Vanity! All is vanity!" And suddenly the smile turned into the leering grin of a skull, covered with the worms of the grave. Ahaziah, with the shaft of Jehu's archer quivering in his loins, thundered by in his chariot to die at Megiddo, and his wheels ruthlessly crushed his mother, Athaliah the Sidonian, who in one day had slain all but one of the seed royal of Judah. She waved her blood-dripping hands in a vain appeal for mercy. Azariah, the profaner of the Holy of Holies whom Jahveh smote so that he became a leper, came next, and the rotting lips in his sightless face mumbled words of praise that seemed a mockery: "Blessed be the Holy One of Israel, who hath established the House of David!" Last of all came a pillar of smoke and flame, and out of the smoke a voice came forth, saying: "The seed of David for the sins of Judah! Give! Give! Give to Jahveh, but not as I gave!" With a cry of horror King Hezekiah awoke trembling from the sleep which yet was no sleep, for the voice was the voice of King Ahaz, his father, and Jahveh had answered his prayers. Nehushta, the daughter of his blood, must be sacrificed to save Judah!

CHAPTER V

ON the eleventh day of the month Tamuz, the day after the return of the messengers from Lachish, dawn broke in matchless splendour over the Holy City, and with its first rays Amon sought an audience of the Grand Vizier Eliakim-ben-Hilkiah. It was his intention to tell him that he would support with all his influence the policy of submission to Assyria, in accordance with the great popular revulsion which had taken place in Jerusalem since the days when the whole land was aflame with a mad and unthinking patriotism which not even the King dared oppose.

A few weeks had sufficed for the final collapse of the party that placed its trust in Egypt, and they now stood aghast at the rapidity and deadliness of the Great King's advance. Starting in the far North, where it seemed as if a swarm of locusts had descended on Sidon the Beautiful, surrounded by her green orchards and set like a jewel upon the shining bosom of the Great Sea, the invasion had swept southwards like an avalanche of death and destruction. Bet-zitti, Sarepta, Akzibi and Akko fell in quick succession, and then the Great King, who always endeavoured to make his military operations march hand in hand with adroit and effective diplomacy, called a halt at Ushu, on the Sidonian coast, to his booty-laden warriors. He issued a proclamation calling upon the rebellious

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Princes who had joined Hezekiah to lay down their arms and promised to spare their dominions and to be content with a moderate tribute. The effect was instantaneous. A number of Princes flocked to the Great King's camp with a heavy tribute of bullocks and small cattle. Abdilitu, King of Arvad and master of a thousand deep-sea galleys; Urumilku, King of Gebal; Mitinti, the *Seren* of Ashdod; Pudu-ilu, the cruel Sheikh of the B'ne-Ammon; Chemosh-nadab, King of Moab; and Malik-ram, the crafty Chief of the Children of Edom—all of them, together with their great men, their counsellors, and their elders, crawled on all-fours like dogs before the Great King and implored for mercy. And as for the Princes who would not submit, they were exposed to the worst terrors of Assyrian frightfulness and practically annihilated.

Philistia, sacked, devastated and burned, lay as helpless as a limb rotting with gangrene, and almost daily, Amon, fretting his martial soul out in enforced inactivity in Jerusalem, heard from the lips of scouts, refugees and disbanded soldiers tales of a cruelty and atrocity such as had not been experienced in Judah for many years. Joppa had been plundered and all the males who survived the final assault were burnt alive in one huge pyre. Beth-dagon and Bcne-berak were razed to the ground. At Azuru the elders of the city were made to kneel in a row while Sennacherib passed slowly along in his great war-chariot and put their eyes out with a golden spear. Outside Ashkelon the Assyrian soldiers took the sacred fishes dedicated to the Goddess Derketo from the Holy Pool and flung them into cauldrons of boiling water. The priests that ministered to them were forced to eat the sacred

animals, and were then slaughtered like so many sheep. Finally the siege-machines broke down the defences of the walls and the savage troops burst through the breaches like a blast of hell-fire. The wretched *Seren* and all his family were seized amid the burning ruins of the royal palace and sent in chains to Nineveh, while his chief officers were flayed alive and their skins spread on the ruins of the battlements.

As for the promised help of Egypt, the intrigues of which, aided and abetted by the former Grand Vizier Shebna, the evil genius of Judah's policy, had at last succeeded in dragging Hezekiah into this wretched coalition, it seemed as far off as ever. The miserable and cowardly Pharaohs of the Delta and the North Arabian Kings of Melukha and of Mutsri lay on the southern frontier trembling and undecided, and Judah, solitary, abandoned and panic-stricken, awoke fully to the realization of the enormous military strength of Assyria and of the new and relentless efficiency which had come gradually to replace the old, haphazard plundering expeditions into the West. The tireless energy and the immense ambitions of Sennacherib had changed Assyria from a strong military nation into a marvellous and irresistible engine of world-conquest.

After his audience with the Grand Vizier Amon had returned to the Palace, whence, at the head of three hundred *Gibborim* or Palace Guards bearing golden shields, he had escorted the King to the Hall of Judgment. King Hezekiah sat upon the Lion Throne amid a scene that still bore witness to the traditions of splendour which Solomon the Great had been the first to associate with the House of David. On his right and on his left stood the greatest personages in the

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state. Prince Amon and other Princes of the B'ne-David; Theokhares and the chief Carian officers; the Sheikhs of the Arab mercenaries; Azariah, the venerable High Priest; Nefer-ra and Sebekenf, the Envoys of the Pharaohs of Bubastis and of Tanis; the three Viziers Eliakim, Shebna and Joach, and a host of other soldiers, priests, and State officials. The King wore a fringed robe of pure white Egyptian linen draped with purple, and on his head was a square gold-embroidered mitre. His face was thin and ascetic-looking, wasted by the long fasts and religious penances which he imposed on himself. His thick and rather protruding lips stood out from his black beard, giving him a sensual appearance which contrasted strangely with the rest of his features. His hair fell in long, grey-streaked locks on his shoulders, and his eyes were of a deep grey, flecked with golden-brown spots, and with a mild, spiritual expression. His age was about thirty-five years. A great hush fell upon the assembled people as the first words fell from the King's lips.

“O Princes of the House of David! Ye heard only last night the answer which the King of Assyria has given to my messengers. You know that Judah has been abandoned and betrayed by those who should have stood firm in the hour of trial. And now, because I have listened to evil counsellors, I must give up the flesh of my flesh and bear my troubles! With a sorrowful heart I prayed to Jahveh in the night that He might show me the path, and in answer to my prayers He caused me to behold the spirits of my fathers—peace be upon them! From the depths of Sheol they told me of the way whereon I must tread. It is a weary one, and I would have your counsel and

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listen to the words of my captains and men of war, for peradventure Jahveh hath shown to some one of them an easier way ! ”

A great confusion arose in the Hall, for many wished to be heard, and though the soldiers were for war, many were for peace. With guttural tones the Carians called for battle, while the wild shriek of the desert Arabs invoked death upon the invaders, and above all, like a trumpet-call, sounded the old Hebrew *Teruah*, or battle-cry : “ *Chereb Jahveh !* ” (The Sword of Jahveh !) Gradually, however, the shouting subsided, and Prince Amon stood before the steps of the throne leaning on his great sword. Every voice was hushed as soon as the Prince began to speak.

“ Live for ever, O King ! I have heard the words that thou hast said, and they are good words, although there should be one answer only to the insolent message of the King of Assyria : an answer that we would be ready to give were it not for the treachery and cowardice of our allies.” Amon’s hand toyed nervously with the hilt of his sword. “ As jackals slink away in the light of the dawn or before a child with a stick, so have they fled before the Assyrian hosts ! And as for those in whom we were told to place our greatest trust, those old enemies of our blood and faith, those Egyptians whose wisdom is as the wisdom of serpents, like overfed reptiles indeed do they sleep on the borders of Judah ! ”

An exclamation of anger burst from the two Egyptian envoys who stood within a few paces of Amon, and for a moment it seemed as if Nefer-ra, who had drawn his dagger, were about to attack the Prince. But Amon merely bestowed a contemptuous glance upon him and continued to speak.

“ Yet, O King, our numbers are small and each man followeth after the desire of his own heart, while the Assyrians are as the sands of the seashore for multitude ! Their hearts falter not, nor doth their purpose fail. Therefore, though it be counted for shame to me who am a soldier and a Prince of the B’ne-David, my counsel is this, O Lion of Judah ! Yield now to these vile Assyrian dogs, but strengthen the walls of this city still further, Son of David, for the Assyrians are ever treacherous. And as for revenge, let us wait until Jahveh shall again increase the strength of Judah, or perchance until He puts a new heart into the Egyptians ! ”

Voices rose and fell on all sides like the sound of the waves of the sea, some protesting and some agreeing, and suddenly Nefer-ra strode forward with blazing eyes, his tall, lean figure dwarfed as he stood close to Amon. Unmindful of dignity, the Egyptian burst into impassioned speech, his foreign accent and his excitement making the Hebrew words sound harsh and deformed.

“ How much longer, O King, will you permit your people to revile me, who am your servant and the servant of the Pharaoh ? May he live through eternity ! Has not Egypt striven for years to stem the rising tide of Assyria’s power, and has she not more to fear than my Lord the King among his mountain strongholds ? There is but one Temple within these walls, but there are a thousand mightier ones open to the plunderer on the banks of the Great River, and ten thousand inhabitants of our sacred land ready to pour out their blood in defence of each one of them. Wherefore does my Lord doubt that the Pharaoh—may he live through eternity !—will fly to my Lord’s aid, together

with all the rulers of Egypt and with Shabatoka, our Ethiopian ally, who has promised to send his son Tirhakah northwards to help us? The armies of His Holiness are even now at Zalu on the borders of this land, and with them are the countless chariots of the King of Melukha and of the King of Mutsri. Let my Lord therefore fight for his kingdom and resist to the death these insolent Assyrians! Let him not yield to the counsels of timid priests who put their faith in the slaughter of harmless bullocks and rams! Let him put no trust in prophets who mutter and threaten, and lo, nothing happens! Let him not heed the words of soldiers whose hearts have been turned to water by fear of Assyria! O King, let the bronze cuirasses of your valiant soldiers make a ring around your Palace stronger even than the strong walls of this great city! Defy Assyria, O Son of Jahveh, and trust to the valour and help of the Chosen One of Ra—may he live through eternity!”

A roar of approval from all the partisans of Egypt greeted these words, and a slight smile of satisfaction spread over the Egyptian's impassive features. Hezekiah's hands clutched convulsively at the heavily carved and bejewelled arms of the Golden Throne, for in spite of himself a faint hope had been roused within him. For a moment he saw the Assyrians hurling their forces in vain against the mighty defences of Jerusalem, only to melt away northwards before a flank attack of the Egyptians. He saw his beloved daughter snatched from a living death, and Judah restored once more to the proud and independent position which his father had sacrificed. Nefer-ra and the other Egyptian envoy were talking eagerly to Shebna, while Amon still stood facing the Throne

with impatience and contempt depicted on his features. The Prince started with anger when he saw that the Vizier Shebna, profiting by the impression which had undoubtedly been produced by the words of Nefer-ra, was about to make a last attempt to influence the King's decision. Cunning and fear were written upon the Vizier's gross, sensual face. Cunning he needed, for he knew he must tread warily lest further degradations awaited him, and fear was in him because he felt that all was not well with his deep-laid schemes for his own aggrandisement. Unlike the other speakers, he knelt down, touched the ground with his forehead and remained in a kneeling posture while addressing the King. His great fat body looked like that of some huge crouching toad. His face, ravaged by dissipation and disease, was repulsively ugly, and his voice was unctuous with obsequiousness. He rubbed his hands slowly together, and occasionally threw upward furtive glances at the King and at Prince Amon. "I am thy slave and the dust of thy feet, O Gate of Wisdom ! Thou alone canst say whether it is to be peace or war. Yet I would humbly counsel thee, O Lord of Life and Death, to put thy trust in Our Lord Jahveh, for He shall surely defend His dwelling-place. Thou knowest, O Great King, that the Holy Prophet Isaiah has lately spoken a prophecy concerning the peoples of the earth who are but the instruments of Jahveh's will. Shall Jahveh then be powerless to bring Egypt against Ashur as He has brought Ashur against thee, O my Master ? "

Before the cunning suggestion of these words had had time to produce a deep impression on the King's mind, a sudden diversion utterly destroyed their effect. The crowd in the body of the Hall parted as if some irre-

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sistible force were pressing it back, and two men, Isaiah the Prophet and his son, were seen to advance slowly towards the Throne. A Divine force seemed to irradiate from the inspired Seer's person. His noble head with its snowy locks was held proudly and defiantly, but his eyes were closed as if he communed with Jahveh Himself. In his left hand he held a long ivory staff, while his right hand rested on the shoulder of the younger man, who was clad in a short blue tunic girdled with a coarse rope of camel's hair. Murmurs of awe, adoration and respect were heard on all sides. Many fell on their knees and kissed the hem of the Prophet's cloak, as he made straight for the spot where Shebna still knelt. The Vizier seemed to cower visibly as the Holy Prophet stood over him and addressed him.

"What doest thou here, O Shebna? And why is the Name of the Holy One of Israel upon thy lips? He hath pulled thee down from thy station and thrust thee from thy office! Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, hath he clothed with thy robe, and upon his shoulder hath he laid the key of the House of David, so that he shall open and none shall shut, and he shall shut and none shall open." The Prophet's voice grew louder as he pointed an accusing finger at the Vizier. "Behold, the Lord will hurl thee violently from Jerusalem, and outside the walls of the Holy City shalt thou die, thou shame of thy father's house!"

The miserable Shebna seemed to grovel with superstitious fear before the Prophet's prediction of death, and he had to be assisted to his feet by some of his servants. Advancing still nearer to the Throne, the Prophet addressed himself directly to the King. "O Son of David, open thy heart to my words, for I bring

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thee wisdom and understanding ! Assyria hath no power to harm a hair of thy head, for her soldiers are but men and not gods, and as for Egypt, she but strives to make a shield of thy kingdom against Assyria ! Heed not Egypt, O Hezekiah, for her doom is spoken ! Heed not the Assyrian, for he is but the rod of the Holy One's anger ! Harken, O King, to the word of Jahveh which He hath commanded me to speak unto thee : ' Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help ; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many ; and in horsemen, because they are very strong ; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord ! ' Let thy daughter go forth, O Servant of Jahveh, for so surely as my hand leaneth upon the shoulder of this my son Shear-jashub, whom the prophetess my wife bare unto me on the day that thy father sinned against the Lord at the fiery furnace of Tophet, so surely as the Lord sent His angel to cleanse my lips in the Temple with the live coal from the altar on the day that His call came unto me, as surely shall Jahveh find a way of salvation for thee and for thy daughter ! ”

As suddenly and as silently as they had come the Holy Prophet and his son went forth from the Hall of Judgment, and before the King could speak Hadad, the Chief Eunuch, stepped forward and prostrated himself deeply, before the Throne, touching the ground with his forehead.

“ Live for ever, O Mighty King ! ” said the eunuch. “ The Princess Nehushta bids me speak thus unto thee : ‘ Be not sorrowful of heart, O my father ; neither grieve for me, for I have taken counsel of the night and Jahveh spoke to me in a dream and these were His words : “ Yield thyself as a peace-offering for

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Judah, O Daughter of My Anointed, for I, even I, shall reward thee ! ” ’. Therefore the Lady Nehushta bids my Lord the King to make all preparations for her setting forth to Lachish.”

The King bowed his head, covered his eyes with his hand and his lips moved as if in silent prayer. When he raised his face again it was radiant with the illuminating fires of faith.

“The uncertainty and the striving are at an end, O my people ! Thrice has Jahveh spoken to me : through the spirits of my fathers ; through the mouth of His Holy Prophet ; and in a dream to my beloved daughter herself ! Let messengers therefore go forth to Lachish bearing rich gifts for the King of Assyria, and let the treasure which he has demanded of me be sent to Nineveh. If there be not enough of gold and of silver in the Temple treasury, let the doors and walls of Jahveh’s dwelling-place be stripped of their golden covering. As for the Princess Nehushta, let her go forth with her hand-maidens and let her be for a peace-offering between me and the King of Assyria. Furthermore, do thou, O Prince Amon, bring before me now the King of Ekron. Let him be told that in my mercy I have resolved to restore him to his throne and to his people ! ” ’

When the name of the King of Ekron was mentioned, Amon happened to look at Shebna and the Egyptian envoys who stood close together, and he fancied he saw an expression of anxiety and consternation pass over the Vizier’s face. Shebna stepped forward as if to say something, but Nefer-ra caught hold of his arm and whispered some words to him, whereupon he drew back again and was silent. Amon took the royal

signet-ring from the Grand Vizier Eliakim and made his way out of the Hall accompanied by a few of his *Gibborim*. Their way lay through the adjacent Hall of Pillars and the crowds that thronged its approaches.

The barracks of the Carian Guards occupied a considerable part of the eastern portion of the royal enclosure, and behind them lay the prison-house abutting on the city walls, the summit of which at this spot towered nearly three hundred feet above the bed of the Kidron Valley. Prisoners of importance were usually confined in the barracks and entrusted to the care of one of the Carian officers, who became responsible for their safe keeping. The prison-house itself was reserved for those who had incurred the severe displeasure of the King or who had been guilty of treason. When the King of Ekron was dethroned because of his faithfulness to Assyria and betrayed into the hands of Hezekiah as head of the coalition against the Assyrians, he had been incarcerated in the barracks after being submitted to the indignity of a progress through the narrow lanes of Jerusalem loaded with chains and jeered at by the populace on the housetops.

At the barracks the Prince was met by Kretos, the officer to whom Padi had been entrusted. Kretos saluted the Prince, kissed the royal ring which was held out to him, and inquired what might be Amon's pleasure.

"I have come to fetch your prisoner, Padi of Ekron, by order of our Lord the King. Bring him forth."

"Nay, my Lord," replied the Carian, shrugging his shoulders, "he is no longer here."

"No longer here!" said Amon quickly, with a gesture of surprise. "Has he then been allowed to escape?"

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“ Not so, Lord Amon, but some weeks ago the Vizier Shebna, left alone with the prisoner, accused him of blasphemy and bade me deliver him up, as he had incurred the King’s displeasure, and he had him removed to the prison-house. For all I know he is still there,” added the Carian with a grim laugh, “ unless he be dead ! When my Lord Shebna was in power, the King’s displeasure and his own were all one ! ”

With an exclamation of annoyance the Prince, asking Kretos to accompany him, passed through the barracks into a maze of narrow passages leading to the prison. They came to a small doorway, at which the Carian officer knocked thrice in a peculiar fashion until the door was opened by a hideous negro, who, at the sight of the royal ring, immediately flung the door wide open.

“ We seek Padi the Ekronite by order of our Lord the King,” said Amon once more ; “ bring him forth.”

“ He is within, Lord ! Shall the dust of my Lord’s feet lead my Lord to him ? ”

“ Nay, bring him forth, for it is the King’s wish to set him free.” The negro grinned ferociously.

“ They who have dwelt long in the prison-house walk not forth even at the King’s bidding ! ”

“ Is he sick, then ? ” inquired Kretos.

“ Let my Lord but see him and say what shall be done,” and without waiting for any further questions the negro led the way down a dark, stone-paved passage. After one or two turns they descended some steps cut in the living rock, at the bottom of which they came to a stout oaken door, which the negro unfastened and threw open. At first very little could be distinguished in the gloom, for the place was lighted only by a kind of circular opening in the high vaulted

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roof, through which rain as well as light penetrated, so that the floor of the dungeon was covered with a thick layer of filthy mud. Almost under the opening a shapeless, huddled mass was visible, in which it was at first difficult to recognize a human being. His feet were fettered by a heavy bronze chain, and his neck was held in a kind of wooden collar fixed to a post in the ground, so that his body was bent almost double. He was naked except for some filthy rags round his loins, and as the door was thrown open a low kind of moaning escaped from the lips of the miserable creature.

Horror-struck at the sight, Amon ordered the negro to release the prisoner, and with a few deft blows the upper portion of the collar fell away so that his head was liberated. For a moment he swayed and tottered slowly like some wounded animal, then fell heavily to the ground, and it was only with great difficulty that two of the *Gibborim* succeeded in carrying him up the narrow stone steps and out through the barracks. Their passage excited a certain curiosity among the lounging soldiers, for though most of them were hardened by years of fighting and pitiless carnage, they could not help being affected by the sight of the unfortunate King of Ekron. The cramped position in which he had evidently been kept for many weeks had so stiffened his muscles that his body was bent almost in half. His flesh was covered with festering ulcers, and on his breast and on the soles of his feet raw and bleeding sores in the shape of a large letter "HE," showed where the initial of Hezekiah's name had been branded into the flesh. His dark hair and beard were thickly matted with dirt, and a low moaning sound escaped continuously from his lips, while with his bony

hands he groped around him in a peculiar way which Amon could not at first understand, until he looked closely into his face and saw that the unhappy prisoner's eyes had been sewn up, so that he dwelt in darkness.

Fearing that they would be unable to carry the captive King through the closely packed crowd that thronged the eastern side of the Hall of Judgment, the *Gibborim* made a detour through the Gate of the Guards, thus approaching the Hall of Judgment through the Palace court.

The sun poured a flood of golden light on the slender lotus-crowned pillars of rosy granite that clustered round the canopied marble basin in its midst. The sound of softly-plashing waters mingled with the faint hum of the distant throng in the Throne Hall, and at intervals the hot stillness was sharply broken by the harsh screams of numerous peacocks that strutted about like living jewels of sapphire, emerald and gold. Half carried and half supported, the miserable Padi at last reached the foot of the Lion Throne. His passage through the crowded Hall had caused intense excitement and many conjectures, as none recognized in this human wreck the sullen and haughty King of Ekron. Instinctively Amon's eyes sought Shebna. The Vizier's coarse features seemed livid with fear.

"What is the meaning of this, Prince Amon?" cried the King, who, like every one else, failed to realize the identity of the figure before him. "Why do you bring this man before me instead of the King of Ekron?"

"This is Padi of Ekron, O King!"

A murmur of astonishment went round the Hall at these words, and Hezekiah's voice shook with wrath as he spoke.

“And who has dared to treat this man so shamefully? Did I not tell you, O Shebna,” he said imperiously to the quaking Vizier, “to treat him kindly, and not to vex his soul? Speak, you accursed Syrian dog! Explain, before I order your carcass to be thrown into the Kidron for jackals to feed upon!”

“Mercy, O Mighty King!” replied the cringing Vizier. “I caused Padi to be punished because he insulted the Majesty of my Lord the King and blasphemed the Holy Name of Jahveh! At the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread he spoke slightingly of thy name, O King! I had gone on a visit of inspection to the Carian barracks, and had asked the Lord Nefer-ra to accompany me. When I spoke to Padi and told him that Sennacherib was come up against Judah, he replied that soon Assyria would eat up Judah and that the head of my Lord the King would make a footstool for the Great King. And when I reproved him for these words and told him that the Lord Jahveh would protect Judah he laughed, and said that his own god, Baal-Zebub of Ekron, would send a plague of flies which would drive Jahveh’s priests from His sanctuary and would consume the sacrifices. Therefore, O King, for thy sake I caused Padi to be removed to the prison-house, and his eyes to be sewn up. Before Jahveh I swear I speak the truth! Let the Lord Nefer-ra bear witness thereto!”

Nefer-ra nodded quickly in assent, though he knew that Shebna lied, for it was neither Jahveh nor the King whom Padi had offended, but the Vizier himself. While Shebna and Nefer-ra had been alone with him for a few moments, Shebna had covetously torn a string of precious amulets from the captive King’s neck, and when Padi turned upon him, spat in his

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face and cursed him, calling him "Syrian dog!" Shebna, choking with rage, had called in the Carian guards, accused him of blaspheming Jahveh and ordered him to be beaten on the soles of the feet. And that same night he had had him removed to the prison-house to be turned into the poor blinded wreck that now stood swaying before the King of Judah's Throne.

A slight murmur of approval from Shebna's adherents greeted his explanation, while the miserable Padi, who seemed half dazed, could only mutter, "He lies, he lies!" For a moment the King seemed irresolute, but the situation was too critical to admit of any further complications or internal dissensions in the Court, and moreover he reflected that if any vassal of his had fallen into Sennacherib's hands under similar circumstances he would probably have fared much worse. With a gesture of anger and impatience, Hezekiah apparently accepted the Vizier's explanation, and called for his own Babylonian physician, bidding him unsew the prisoner's eyes. Padi was made to kneel in front of the Throne, and amid the breathless anxiety of the onlookers the physician with a few deft strokes of his bronze lancet cut through the flesh which had grown together.

"Open thy eyes, O Padi!" said the physician.

Drops of blood trickled down the wretched man's face and into his matted beard, and for a few seconds his red and swollen eyelids, half paralysed by disuse, fluttered weakly and then were slowly raised. The physician leant eagerly forward, peering into his eyes, and then drew back with a sudden, startled exclamation. Where the eyeballs should have been there were only two festering and sightless masses. Padi stag-

gered to his feet, groping for support, and a low whimpering sound came from his lips. Gradually words came to him, his voice rose and he shrieked forth curses and imprecations upon Shebna and upon the House of David.

“O Baal-Zebub!—O Mighty Keeper of Ekron, curse the B’ne-David in their coming and their going, and let the seed of Shebna be cut off for ever! May their bones turn to water and sight forsake their eyes as it has forsaken mine! May Shebna rot on a dung-heap until his flesh drop away from him, and may he beg a cup of water and may it be refused him! O Mighty Baal, let thy Holy Messengers the flies devour their corpses!”

Mad with rage and foaming at the mouth, Padi made a sudden lightning-like rush towards the place where Shebna stood, as if guided by some supernatural vision. Before he could be stopped his bony hands clutched at the silken robes of the Vizier, who screamed aloud with terror and tried to beat him off. Animated by a superhuman strength, the blind man would undoubtedly have killed the luckless Shebna with his unaided hands had he not been dragged off by the united efforts of three *Gibborim*.

When the full results of Shebna’s cruelty became evident, a great fear came upon the King lest Sennacherib’s demands should grow still more exacting because of the evil that had been wrought upon his servant the King of Ekron. Hezekiah, however, dared not utterly cast down Shebna from his place, for he was too powerful: he had too many partisans, and disaffection was still too rife in Judah. But the anger which at times seized the B’ne-David like a hell-storm, an anger which was like a fit of violent madness became

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unchained. The King's eyes glittered, his nostrils twitched, and his voice, made harsh by blind rage, came forth in choking gasps. He half rose from his seat and with an imperious gesture summoned the trembling Vizier to the foot of the Throne.

"Thou dog and son of a dog, whom I raised up when thou wert but a stranger within my gates even to be my servant and the lord of my house! Once already have I cast thee down from thy place, and now, as Jahveh liveth, ought I to put thy eyes out as thou hast done to this man, and throw thy carcass to the dogs thy brothers! But I will leave thy final punishment to Jahveh. In the meantime let Padi be brought into thy house, and there, in the sight of all thy servants and of thy slaves, shalt thou wash his feet and anoint them with precious unguents and clothe him in rich robes. And until he goeth forth from Jerusalem shalt thou be his slave and attend upon his lightest wish. I have spoken!"

CHAPTER VI

WHERE the northern road entered Jerusalem at the Fish Gate it divided into two principal streets: one, known as the Street of the Fish Gate, ran close under the western walls of the Temple and led to the great flight of steps by the side of the Pool of Siloam; the other, the Street of David, ran south across the whole of the Upper City, ascending the slopes of Mount Zion and ending at the Dung Gate. It was in this latter street that the Vizier Shebna had built his great Palace, every stone of which stood for extortion and robbery and was cemented with the blood of the innocent and the tears of the oppressed.

Facing this Palace was the house of the Prince Amon, and two days after the liberation of Padi, the Prince stood in one of its upper chambers at the sunset hour, awaiting the arrival of Shaftan, the grim old warrior who had been his first master in the profession of arms. Shaftan was the only man in all Jerusalem in whom Amon placed absolute and complete confidence and trust, and he had resolved to reveal to him his plan for the rescue of Nehushta and to invoke his aid in arranging the details of the scheme. As soon as it was explained to him, however, Shaftan sought to discourage the Prince from attempting it, not only because of the great risk, in his opinion, of rousing the revengefulness of Assyria if the ruse were discovered,

but also because the Hebrew soldier had a deeply-rooted dislike and mistrust of all the Bedawin tribes.

" 'Tis all very well, Lord," said he, " but you know how I look upon the Arabs and their spawn. Would to Jahveh the King had never brought them into Jerusalem, where I feel certain they will be the cause of serious trouble sooner or later. To my mind I would as soon trust the Lady Nehushta to an Assyrian as to an Arab of the desert. How know you that this Amru, this misbegotten son of a she-camel, will keep his word? Will he not rather make off to the desert whither no one may follow him and try to obtain a rich ransom for the Princess?"

"Nay, nay, Shaftan," answered the Prince laughingly, "you are an old fox and trust no man. Besides, I have thought of a sure way to make Amru keep his word. I and two or three of my men will let ourselves be captured with Nehushta, so as to be able to watch over her."

The old soldier shook his head and laughed boisterously at these words.

"Aye; and when it comes to the fighting you will throw all prudence to the winds and kill twenty or thirty of the vermin before you allow yourself to be captured! After that Amru will be hard put to it to stop his men from murdering you in your sleep to avenge their fellows' blood."

"Then why not let yourself be captured, Shaftan, and watch over the Princess for me till she is brought back?" asked the Prince with a smile. The veteran started with surprise, then laid his hand tenderly on the young Prince's shoulder.

"Even that would I do for you, O Prince, if it be your wish," he replied simply, and his eyes grew soft, for

he loved the young man as if he were his own son. "And when the Princess has been captured—and I too," he added with a grimace, "what do you propose to do? The messengers must proceed on their road, and how will they explain her disappearance to Sennacherib? Think you the Great King will believe their story?" And Shaftan laughed again, and with an expressive gesture drew his hand across his own throat.

"That is where I need the help of your cunning, old friend," replied Amon. "It is clear that some one must be found to take Nehushta's place if she is to disappear from the caravan which will then proceed to Lachish. But who shall take her place? What woman is there in the whole of Judah whose beauty is great enough to merit the fame of the Princess's beauty? And even if one such were found, how could she be persuaded to sacrifice herself to the vile destiny that would be hers without betraying our secret?"

Shaftan pondered awhile in silence, his great, rough hands toying absent-mindedly with the buckle of his sword-belt.

"By my beard, there is but one way, O Prince!" he cried suddenly. "The time is getting short, for the King has commanded the messengers to depart for Lachish the day after to-morrow. Let us therefore go this very night to the Temple of Ashtoreth and do you redeem a *Kedeshah* from the priests there. Let her go forth with the caravan as one of the Princess's attendants, and when the moment comes let her take the Lady Nehushta's place. Some of these *Kedeshot* are exceedingly beautiful, and though 'tis true they are mostly Phœnicians and Egyptians, still one may be found speaking Hebrew sufficiently well to deceive Sennacherib. Leave all to me, O Prince.

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When we have found a suitable girl, all will go smoothly."

The idea of deceiving the Great King with the help of one of the very class of women to which, with his usual bestial cruelty, he wished to reduce a royal Princess, appealed strongly to Amon, and as evening closed in he went forth with Shaftan to seek the Chief Priest at the Temple of Ashtoreth on the Mount of Olives.

Out in the streets the uproar of the filthy rabble that gathered every evening to shout curses and abuse at the impassive walls of Shebna's palace seemed louder than ever. Armed men had come out of the Vizier's house and were roughly pushing the crowd back and laying about them with the flat of their swords. Four huge negroes came running out of the gate bearing a curtained litter, within which the Vizier rode, and there was a redoubling of the imprecations, followed by the throwing of filth and mud. By the side of the litter a misshapen and richly-attired creature, behind whom came two Egyptian slaves, ran with the agile leaping movements of some horrible baboon. As he passed Amon and Shaftan he scowled heavily at the Prince and spat ostentatiously into the street. Shaftan's hand flew to his sword-hilt, but Amon restrained him.

"Let the carrion be, Shaftan! I know not his name, but I remember his ugly face and misshapen limbs. Some time ago, outside the Ephraim Gate, where I was inspecting some camels for the King's stables, he passed by me, accompanied by a beautiful girl, and because she smiled at me he struck her in the face. Whereupon I knocked him over with my hand, and before he could rise up from the ground, where he

lay spitting venom like an angry toad and heaping threats and curses upon me, the girl escaped, nor do I know what became of her. By Jahveh!" continued the Prince, "this very instant have I remembered something. She was one of the dancers from the Temple of Ashtoreth who danced at the Palace on the night the messengers returned from Lachish! Dost remember that she threw a flower at me? And the man, Shaftan, dost thou know him?"

"Aye, Lord," growled the old soldier, "and I wish you had let me slit his cursed throat for him! He is an evil man, a slave-dealer of Edom, Bela by name, who comes often to the gate of the King's house to sell slaves and silken stuffs. And wherever that misshapen dog appears there mischief is sure to follow. 'Tis not the first time Shebna plots with him."

Crossing the crowded city in an eastward direction they went out at the Water Gate. To the right a steep path led down to a huge pile of rock and masonry, showing where the Gihon spring had been covered over a few months previously. Turning to the left the two men soon reached a thick grove of olive trees covering the whole of the lower part of the valley and spreading upwards almost to the enclosing wall of the Temple of Ashtoreth, which stood on the summit of the Mount of Olives. This Temple had been erected by King Solomon in honour of the chief Goddess worshipped by one of his numerous wives, a Sidonian Princess. It consisted of a series of gardens, courts and buildings surrounding a larger building where the Goddess herself dwelt. Amon knew that on that night the Temple would be deserted except for the Chief Priest, who dwelt in a house in the Temple gardens, a few minor priests and the *Kedeshot* or Sacred Women dedicated

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to the Goddess. On the following night, however, when the moon would be at its full, the festivities in honour of the monthly manifestation of the Queen of Heaven in all her splendour would take place and the Temple would be crowded with worshippers.

The gate in the outer enclosure was wide open, and they passed into a small grove of oak trees where a number of kids, tethered to stakes in the ground and destined to be sacrificed to the Goddess, bleated mournfully. Small booths were scattered about at which crescent-shaped cakes, clay images of the Goddess, and obscene symbols were sold. Beyond the trees lay an open space bathed in the silvery light of the moon and surrounded by three buildings. Facing the grove was the Temple itself, built of white stone and with towers at each corner. On the left ran a low building of cedar-wood, the *Lishkah* or Festival Hall where the worshippers assembled to eat the sacrificial meals and to drink wine. On the right of the Temple there was a long terrace reached by some eight or ten steps running along its whole length. On top of this terrace there was a long, narrow wooden gallery divided into cells which were closed in front by mats of finely-plaited straw. At the bottom of the steps and close to the end farthest from the Temple stood a group of men in animated conversation, and Amon and Shaftan were just about to step out of the shadow of the trees when Shaftan, with a smothered exclamation, drew the Prince back into the shelter of the grove. "Look!" he whispered, "Shebna!"

■ A high magnolia hedge, which made the atmosphere heavy with its perfume, ran from behind the terrace towards the trees, and by walking cautiously behind it Amon and Shaftan were enabled to come almost

abreast of the men and to see and hear everything through the foliage of the hedge, without being seen. It was indeed the Vizier Shebna and Bela the Edomite who stood there talking to the Chief Priest of Ashtoreth, a short, fat, smooth-faced man wearing a conical purple cap and a fringed linen robe. Round them, holding torches in their hands, stood six or eight barefooted priests with shaven heads and faces. "I tell thee, Father, that she must be given up!" Shebna was saying to the Chief Priest. "This man redeemed her from the Priests of Ashtoreth at Sidon, and therefore she is his property."

"That is as it may be, my Lord Shebna; but the woman has sought sanctuary here, and unless she is willing to go forth it would offend the Goddess if one of her Holy *Kedeshot* should be driven out; unless, indeed," and the priest hesitated for an instant, "an equivalent offering were made to the shrine of the Goddess."

Shebna smiled cynically at these words. "Bring her forth, Father," he said, "and we shall see whether indeed she be worth a valuable gift to the Goddess."

"Yes, yes, bring her forth," repeated the Edomite, who seemed to be the victim of some unnatural excitement. The Chief Priest ascended the steps leading to the terrace and raising the hangings of one of the cells called out, "Zibiah, Zibiah, come forth!"

In answer to his summons the curtain of one of the cells was slowly lifted, and a beautiful, half-naked, slender girl, her unbound hair flowing in ebony waves over her snowy shoulders, stood on the threshold of the cell. Amon started and caught hold of Shaf-tan's arm. "By Jahveh!" he whispered, "'tis the

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little dancing-girl who fled from the cripple at the Gate of Ephraim!" Almost instantly the girl's eyes fell on the Edomite, whose hideous face, contorted with passion, was fully revealed by the light of the moon. With a cry of terror the girl attempted to retreat, but the priest seized her by the wrist and forcibly detained her. Apparently unable to restrain his feelings any longer, Bela bounded up the steps like some horribly misshapen monkey and grasping the trembling girl's arm began to abuse her violently for having escaped from him. Amon and Shaftan heard the Vizier offer the priest a large sum to let the girl go, and they wondered greatly as to what his motive might be. Almost before the priest had time to assent or refuse, the Edomite, who looked like some jailer half-mad with devilish joy at having regained possession of a valuable prisoner, dragged the terrified girl roughly down the steps.

"My Lord Shebna," he said hurriedly to the Vizier, "I thank thee for what thou hast done for me this night, and be thou sure that Bela will forthwith do thy bidding at any cost." Drawing the Vizier aside suddenly so as to be out of hearing of the other priests, while still retaining his hold of Zibiah who struggled weakly in his grasp, he whispered a few words in his ear, and without waiting further threw his cloak over the girl and hurried her off into the grove, followed by his Egyptian slaves; while Shebna, having given a purse to the priest, entered his litter which was close at hand and was carried rapidly away towards the entrance of the Temple.

"Did I not tell you, Prince, that that son of a one-eyed mule was plotting some mischief? What think you Shebna's bidding to him was for doing which

he has been allowed to fly off with his pretty prize ? But come, let us make an end of our business."

In the meanwhile, roused by the shrieks and entreaties of the girl whom the Chief Priest had called Zibiah, the *Kedeshot* came out of their cells like panthers out of their lairs. Their naked shoulders and limbs, gleaming in the flickering light of the torches, gave them the appearance of animated statues of marble, of ivory and of bronze, for among them there were representatives of many climes. Heavily-built and squat Chaldæans and slender dark-skinned Egyptians mingled with bronze-coloured Ethiopians, with a sprinkling of beautiful Hebrew girls from Northern Israel, handsome and sensuous Phœnicians, and even a woman from the farthest islands of the North—a tall, wild-looking creature, white as snow and with a great mane of yellow hair.

The pallid and effeminate priests seemed afraid of their coarse jests, but the Chief Priest, drawing a short whip from his belt, was about to use it on the women, when the sudden appearance of Amon and Shaftan made him start violently and almost drop the whip. Recovering himself quickly, he pretended at first to be offended at their presence in the Temple on a night on which worshippers were not usually admitted, but his attitude changed when Amon explained, in as few words as possible, the object of their coming. The Prince had intended to ask the meaning of the strange scene they had witnessed, but before he could speak the priest and Shaftan started haggling over the amount of the price to be paid to the Temple for the release of a *Kedeshah*. As for the women, on seeing Amon and Shaftan their manner almost instinctively reverted to the sensuous seduction which was habitual to them.

They crowded round the two men, and sought by lascivious movements, by lustful cajoling and by a plentiful exhibition of their charms to attract them into their cells. Amon's attention, however, was almost immediately drawn to one of the *Kedeshot*, who stood somewhat apart from the others. She appeared exceedingly young and beautiful and did not behave so brazenly as her companions. In the moonlight and with the loose masses of her dark hair falling over her bare shoulders she bore a strange likeness to Nehushta, and he could not help shuddering at the thought that this girl too had once been as pure and innocent as his beloved. He pointed her out to the Chief Priest and asked what he would demand for her release.

"The Lord Amon," replied Ebed-Ashtart with a horrible leer, "is a good judge of a beauteous maiden ! This one hath just entered into the service of the Goddess, having been sold yesterday to the Temple by her parents, who are poor. To-morrow night she will be dedicated to Our Lady Ashtoreth. See !" he continued, seizing hold of her, "what wealth of hair and what snow-white flesh ! She is worth many shekels of gold !" and he ran his fat, flabby hand through the masses of the shrinking girl's hair and over her beautifully-modelled shoulders in a way that made Amon wish to strangle him.

Speaking brusquely, the Prince asked Ebed-Ashtart to fix a price for the woman, for he was anxious to leave the precincts of the Temple. The pallid eunuch priests with their high, feminine voices disgusted him, and the suffocating effluvia of cinnamon, myrrh, storax, roses and spikenard with which the women's bodies reeked, produced a choking sensation in his

throat. Slowly and reluctantly the *Kedeshot* retired to their cells, defiling the silence of the night with snatches of song and obscene jests. A price was finally agreed upon for the beautiful Israelite, who came from Gilead, the Chief Priest undertaking to have the girl brought to the Prince's house at sunrise on the following day.

Amon was strangely silent on their return to the city. Although the worship of Ashtoreth had too firm a hold on certain sections of the population to be utterly destroyed, in spite of Hezekiah's reforms, Amon had never been a devotee of the Goddess, and now, for the first time, this intimate contact with the unspeakable *Kedeshot* brought home to him the degradation of a worship that was accompanied by such rites. He began dimly to realize the feeling that lay at the root of the savage denunciations of the Holy Prophet Isaiah against the worship of Ashtoreth or the worship of any other god besides Jahveh. Passing through the deserted and silent lanes of Ophel, they were surprised to see once more the litter of Shebna at the gate of a house which abutted on the eastern wall of the city, and Shaftan again gave emphatic expression to his profound distrust at finding such a community of interests between Shebna and Bela, for the house on Ophel outside which the Vizier's litter waited was the house of Bela, the Edomite slave-dealer.

CHAPTER VII

IN the early part of the day on which he had been seen in the Temple of Ashtoreth by the Prince Amon, Shebna lay on a heap of cushions on the high flat roof of his palace, sheltered from the sun's rays by a priceless Babylonian awning. His heart was bitter within him because that morning, for the third time, he had been compelled, in the court of his own house and in the presence of three officials from the Royal Palace, to wash the feet of Padi of Ekron and to serve him with food and drink as if he himself were the meanest of slaves. Humiliation, defeat and degradation following upon success and the possession of almost royal power, had turned the Vizier's blood to gall. As he had for many years betrayed Judah by taking gold from Egypt, from Moab, from Edom and from Melukha as the price of a policy which meant the ruin of Hezekiah's Throne, so now that Moab and Edom were traitors and Egypt and Melukha trembled and were afraid, his mind was ready for a supreme betrayal for the sake of the gold which he must have since power eluded his grasp.

Once or twice some of his servants had ventured to the top of the stairway leading out on the roof and thrown a timid glance at their master's face. What they saw written thereon made them disappear quickly

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with fear tugging at their hearts. At last the Vizier clapped his hands loudly three times, and almost immediately the slave-master stood before him with bowed head and folded arms.

"Let Bela the Edomite be summoned and let him be brought to me. See to it that there be neither prying eyes nor listening ears around me!"

"It is done, Lord," answered the slave-master, withdrawing backwards.

The few words with which Shaftan had described the slave-dealer to the Prince did not cover the whole of his malignant activities. The mind of the crippled and misshapen creature, who was as twisted as if Jahveh's lightnings had blasted him at birth, was as deformed and tortuous as his body. By dint of treachery, usury and the corruption of venal judges he had gradually amassed a considerable amount of wealth, but it was in the capacity of a slave-dealer that he had first come into contact with Shebna, to whose chief eunuch he had sold two beautiful yellow-haired girls brought by Phœnician galleys from the tin islands of the far North. The Vizier had found him a useful and adaptable tool for his secret machinations so long as his lips were sealed with gold, and he had employed him on several secret and semi-diplomatic missions. When the slave-master ushered him into the Vizier's presence a little later, Shebna, after the usual salutations, bade him be seated on the cushions near him.

The conversation of the two men was as guarded and full of metaphors, half-veiled hints and subtle allusions as if the whole of Jerusalem had been listening to their words. But before it was half finished Bela knew what was in the Vizier's mind and the part he

would be expected to play in his treacherous plans. Shebna commenced by saying that although he could no longer entertain much hope that the Pharaohs and the King of Melukha would be able to intervene in time, still he thought it would be wiser not to discourage utterly the strong forces which undoubtedly were present on the frontier by letting them hear too soon of the King's decision to submit.

"Nay, I think it better," continued the Vizier after a few moments' reflection, "to send a message to them privately. 'Behold, our Lord the King doth not yield from his heart!' And then if it reach the ears of the Great King that the Pharaohs and their allies have been comforted, mayhap his heart will be filled with wrath against King Hezekiah and he will decide to lay siege to Jerusalem. And if he come to Jerusalem, what man could say what shall come about? The walls of Jerusalem are strong, but so is Assyria, and their gods have helped them to break down still mightier walls. Then will the time come when those to whom the *Baalim* have vouchsafed wisdom should look to setting their house in order."

A long silence ensued, during which Bela gazed pensively at the Vizier as if he were trying to read his inmost thoughts. "You have a wise and understanding mind, Lord Shebna," said the Edomite at last, "but how should a poor slave-merchant be able to help the deep policies of the great ones of the earth?" The Vizier made a remark which at first appeared totally irrelevant.

"It is said that at the Assyrian camp at Lachish the captains of the Great King are lavish with their wealth, for they have taken great booty in Judah." As Bela merely assented with a nod and said nothing the Vizier

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continued : " Have you no beautiful slaves to sell, Bela ? As your countrymen were among the first to submit to the Great King, you need not fear to trust yourself among the Assyrians."

" I had indeed a beautiful slave, Lord. A *Kedeshah* whom I redeemed from the priests of Ashtoreth at Sidon. She was fresh as a new-blown rose and beautiful as the Queen of Heaven herself. A girl fit for a King's harem, and I had so set my heart upon her that she had become as the apple of my eye. But, alas ! she escaped from my keeping here in Jerusalem, and I would do much to get her back."

" Do you know where she is hidden ? " asked the Vizier with quick comprehension.

" Aye, Lord, but I am not strong enough to get her back. I had brought her to Jerusalem with me, and on the day of our arrival, at the entering in of the Gate of Ephraim, she looked with eyes of love upon the Prince Amon who was inspecting some camels at the Gate, and because I spoke roughly to her she laughed and pointed at my misshapen limbs. A red mist arose before my eyes and I struck her, and then the Prince Amon threw me to the ground and ordered his slaves to beat me before her eyes. May a curse wither his limbs even as mine are withered, and may the *Baalim* bring him into my power but once ! " The Edomite's face had grown white with hatred at the recollection of his misadventure. " In the confusion the girl escaped, and I have heard that she has sought refuge in the Temple of Ashtoreth on the Mount of Olives. There is nothing I would not do, Lord, to repay the Prince Amon. The judges in the Gate to whom I appealed would not give me justice, even though I offered them heavy bribes, for Amon is of the B'ne-David, and

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they are powerful in the land. May their seed be cut off for ever ! ”

“ May the Holy God Rimmon-Hadad hear your words, O Bela,” cried the Vizier, suddenly abandoning his calm attitude, while a cruel sneer contorted his loose-lipped mouth. “ For I too have a score to settle with the B’ne-David. You have doubtless heard, as all Jerusalem has heard, of the shame they have put upon me because of that blind dog, Padi of Ekron. Had I not been a soft-hearted fool I would have had him put to death, so that he could not have prated.” The Vizier subdued his rage as quickly as he had allowed it to rise. “ But come you here this even, Bela, and together let us go to the Temple of Ashtoreth. Perchance I may be able to persuade the priests to let your beautiful slave go free.”

Shebna would have terminated the interview, but Bela fidgeted with the cushions and after a few moments he spoke again, but in a curious, hesitating way. He seemed to fear that Shebna would perceive how deeply he had penetrated his mind.

“ There is one within the very Palace of the King who would help you gladly, Lord, for the sake of the bitter hatred she bears towards all the B’ne-David. You know I am not allowed to go beyond the outer Palace Court to sell jewels, raiment and slaves ; but once, at the last New Year, the old Queen Orpah, whom King Ahaz put away after he had burnt her son at the Tophet, sent word that I was to come to the house wherein she dwells to show her precious stuffs. It is said they fear to kill her because of the madness that is upon her. She lay on a divan in an upper chamber, and in her arms she nursed a wooden doll dressed in rich raiment and adorned with costly jewels. She

crooned to it softly and called it 'Little son.' Her hair was white as the snow on Mount Hermon, and her eyes were like coals of fire. Suddenly, as I was unfolding a piece of precious silk from Damascus, she turned her eyes on me and my heart was troubled within me because of the fierceness of her glance. 'What countryman art thou?' she asked. 'I am of the Children of Edom, O Queen,' I replied. Whereat she laughed shrilly and said, 'Thou art of the Sons of Edom and I was a Princess in Moab, and the B'ne-David have set their foot upon the neck of Moab and wasted Edom. But Chemosh is greater than Jahveh, and as He wasted Israel at Kir-Hareseth because of the sacrifice of a King's first-born, shall He not utterly destroy the B'ne-David for the sacrifice of a Queen's first-born?' And then the fire died in her eyes as if some one had blown it out, and she crooned to the image again."

Bela stopped an instant to watch the effect of his words, but the Vizier's face remained impassive. "There are those who say," he continued slowly, "that the madness of Queen Orpah is but a dissembling lest they put her to death." And Bela rose from the cushions and went forth from the house with the seeds of Shebna's treachery deeply implanted within his evil heart.

Although no scheme was yet quite clear in Shebna's mind, he was contemplating a double treachery which would obtain for him once more the power and wealth for which his soul thirsted. By sending messages of encouragement to the armies of the Egyptian Pharaohs and of the King of Melukha he hoped to make them advance and attack the Assyrians. It was possible but not probable that the latter might be defeated and might retire without attacking Jerusalem, content

with the rich booty they had obtained in Judah. If so, Shebna's policy of reliance on Egypt would be vindicated and he might be restored to power. If, however, the Assyrians defeated the Egyptians, and if, moreover, they were led to believe (and here lay Bela's part) that Hezekiah's submission had only been an outward one, and that he had continued to negotiate with the Egyptians, they would undoubtedly besiege Jerusalem, and then would come his opportunity to betray the city into their hands by some master-stroke which he hoped circumstances would suggest to him. For to such a pass had Shebna come that to satisfy his thirst for power he was ready to stoop to any baseness or treachery and to stab to the heart the country that had helped him to rise. Moreover, knowing well enough that, as a general rule, Assyria was grateful to those who helped her schemes, visions of royal power began to present themselves to his mind. Why should not the Great King set him up as vassal ruler over Judah, he who knew the country and the people so well from long and intimate association? Why should not the House of Shebna rise on the ashes of the House of David?

What happened that same night and how, through the power of the Vizier's gold the Edomite regained possession of the miserable Zibiah is already known. And when Amon and Shaftan on their return from the Temple of Ashtoreth had seen the Vizier's litter outside Bela's house, Shebna was within because of the words that the Edomite had whispered to him in the Temple gardens: "Follow after me to my house, Lord, for perchance news may be told you concerning what is in your heart."

The slave-dealer dwelt on Ophel in a house abutting

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on the eastern wall of the city, and the Vizier was ushered into a large room at the back of the court. A lamp stood on a low table in a corner of the room, and Bela squatted by its side. In the half-darkness his repulsive features appeared to sweat evil as an earthenware jar sweats water in the sun. Close to the table was a low stool on which he bade the Vizier be seated.

"I know what is in your mind, Lord," said Bela, speaking slowly and measuring his words, "and because you have helped me to gain my heart's desire so will I help you to crush the B'ne-David. Tomorrow I go to the Great King's camp at Lachish, and he shall hear a rumour that shall make him come to Jerusalem hastily enough! The seed of the B'ne-David shall be cut off and an evil end shall come to Amon! May the *Baalim*——"

A sudden rustle in one of the dark corners of the room interrupted the flow of his words and made the Vizier start to his feet, clutching wildly at his dagger, for he lived in constant fear of assassination and trusted no one. But Bela reassured him, and taking the lamp from the table he allowed its feeble rays to fall on the opposite corner. A fierce-eyed old woman with a nose hooked like an eagle's beak sat there on a heap of cushions, muttering to herself. "It is my mother, Meshullemeth, who hath a familiar spirit that speaketh through her mouth. Listen, Lord, for perchance the spirit is with her even now."

Although he had often seen and heard those who prophesied by the aid of familiar spirits, Shebna could not help feeling a thrill of superstitious horror on seeing that a grinning skull lay in the old woman's lap. She moved her hands slowly over its polished surface as if she were caressing it. Her body rocked to

and fro and she moaned as if in pain. Gradually she raised the skull in her hands and words began to mingle with her moaning.

“Speak, Lord! Speak to thy daughter! Come, Baal-Milcom! Arise, Baal-Chemosh! Speak, Baal-Ammon!” At last the skull was raised to the height of her face and she rested its long, gruesome teeth against her withered lips. Strong convulsions shook her body and she began to speak in a kind of thin, piping whisper.

“He cometh like a bridegroom in the morning! He who was on high hath been made low and shall be raised on high yet once again! He who befriended Mizraim shall sit on high in Jerusalem! Aram shall place his foot on the neck of Judah! Behold Ashur in flashing armour cometh through the narrow way of the waters.” She ceased suddenly, the skull rolled out of her hands and her head fell forward, while her breath rattled in her throat as if she were at the point of death.

Shebna's heart beat wildly as he listened to the old woman's words. A kind of exaltation pervaded his whole being, making the meaning of the prophecy as clear as the noonday sun. The spirit was no lying spirit! It spoke truly of what was to come! He felt it; he knew it! His surroundings were forgotten for an instant. “He who was on high and was made low shall be raised on high yet once again!” His degradation and his humiliation would be as if they had never been. “Aram shall place his foot on the neck of Judah!” He saw himself standing by the Holy Pillar in the Inner Court of the Temple. He heard the High Priest pronounce the consecrated words as he poured the Holy Oil over his head: “In the Name of

Jahveh I anoint thee King over Judah !” while the priests and the crowds in the outer Court shouted : “ May Jahveh save King Shebna ! ” and the smoke of the sacrifices rose all around him. And suddenly the witch’s last words rang again in his ears : “ Ashur in flashing armour cometh through the narrow way of the waters.” He turned inquiringly to Bela, who in the meantime had raised up the head of his mother and laid her gently on the cushions, where she seemed to fall into a deep sleep.

“ What means she, O Bela, by the way of the waters ? All the rest of her words I can read aright.”

The cripple sank on his knees and touched the ground with his forehead before answering. “ Let my Lord the King that shall be look with favour upon his slave and trust him. For I know what is in my Lord’s heart, and will show him the meaning of the words of my mother.”

Rising, he took the lamp and led the way into the Court, beckoning to Shebna to follow him.

Opening a door in a wall they found themselves in a room used for the storage of dried vegetables and grain, several bags of which were lying about. Removing a few of the bags, Bela lifted a board in the earthen floor. A winding flight of stone steps was revealed down which he invited the Vizier to follow him. The steps ended in a small vaulted room in the opposite wall of which there was a heavy wooden door studded with iron nails and closed by a thick beam resting on iron staples. Bela lifted the beam from its supports and opened the door. Beyond lay a narrow, rock-cut passage about four feet in height, down which they advanced for a short distance with bent backs, until Bela stopped suddenly. The

floor of the passage ended suddenly, and on peering into the black and yawning cavity by the light of the lamp, the Vizier was able to discern, some fifteen or twenty feet below, the floor of another passage also cut in the rock and running transversely to the one in which they stood.

"Fear not to trust me, Lord Shebna!" said Bela once more, "for as I have said, I can read what is in your heart and interpret the secret words of Meshullemeth. Behold the way of the waters through which Ashur shall come in flashing armour; behold also the way that Amon shall go down to his death!" and the cripple pointed dramatically to the cavity at his feet.

"What mean you, Bela?" asked the Vizier. "What is this place?"

"This is the old way down which people used to go to draw water from the Spring Gihon, Lord. When all is ready the Assyrians shall come through here and take the city by surprise in a way that I shall show thee, and because thou wilt have helped them they shall crown thee King over Judah and shall put to death all the males of the B'ne-David! And as for Amon (may a curse wither him!), men shall lie in wait for him; his strength shall be overcome as he overcame my weakness, and they shall throw him into this pit!" The Edomite's teeth were bared in a snarl of hatred like those of a wild beast. "And if he die not of the fall the Assyrians shall impale him if life be still within his body!"

To Shebna the Edomite's supernatural reading of his most intimate thoughts and of his most secret ambitions seemed like a confirmation of his own belief that some Divine force was enlisted on the side of his treachery. He resolved that he would trust Bela

completely. He would attach him to his person by every means and would reward him greatly for his aid. When they returned to the room where the old woman still appeared to be sunk in a deep sleep Bela explained the cunning scheme by which he hoped to avail himself of the network of passages, steps and shafts now no longer in use, by which the inhabitants used to procure water from without the walls.

The chief supply for the Holy City came from the Gihon spring situated outside the walls in a cave at the foot of Mount Ophel and not far from the Water Gate. To avoid the danger of going outside the walls in times of siege the spring was covered over with huge masses of rock from the outside and a rock-cut passage was bored straight into Ophel a hundred years earlier for a distance of sixty feet. The water from the spring flowed into this passage, and at the end of it rose into a shaft pierced straight upwards for a height of forty feet. At the top of this shaft a flight of steps ended in a corridor of the same length as the first, at the end of which another flight of steps led into a vaulted chamber in the side of Ophel, but situated inside the walls. Thus the inhabitants, by going down the steps in the vault, along the passage and down the second flight of steps to the shaft, could draw water without going outside the walls. It was found, however, that the spring was more than sufficient to supply this shaft. Therefore, five years before, by the King's orders, a channel was cut towards the south, underneath the whole of Mount Ophel, so as to lead the water into the Pool of Siloam at the southern end of Ophel. Now it came about by a chance that the course of this channel lay underneath the vaulted chamber inside the walls, and therefore another shaft

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was sunk in its floor to a depth of seventy feet, so that water could be drawn straight up from the channel. At the same time the flight of steps that led from the vaulted chamber into the old underground passages was walled up.

To grasp the scheme of Bela it is necessary to know first of all that the Spring Gihon, being an intermittent one, flowed at intervals varying from a few hours to a couple of days, and when it was empty men could easily pass along the passages to the vaulted chamber on Ophel. Now, although the outlet was walled up a communication existed, as has been seen, with the vault underneath Bela's house. How this came about will be explained later. When the Assyrians came, therefore, it would not be impossible for them partly to uncover the spring.

This would be merely attributed to their desire to obtain a supply of water, and on a day when the spring should empty itself, four or five hundred men could easily pass through the passages and shafts and lie hidden in Bela's house. At a given moment feigned attacks would be delivered against far-away gates to attract the greater part of the garrison, and the Assyrians would rush out of Bela's house. Part would go north to the Palace to seize or kill the King, and part would rush down towards the Pool of Siloam to fall on the defenders from behind and open the Fountain Gate to the besiegers. If, in addition, the Arab mercenaries could be induced to revolt by promises of a great reward and the old insane Queen's help could be enlisted in the Palace itself, the capture of the city would be still easier. As for Amon, Bela proposed to lure him to his house on the eve of the attempt, have him seized and thrown into the passage

to be killed by his fall, or to meet a worse death at the hands of the invading Assyrians.

When Shebna left the Edomite's house it had been finally agreed that he would accept and highly reward Bela's help, not only to convey a forged message to the Assyrians, but also to carry out the still more treacherous plot to betray the city into their hands. The moon had set, and in the dark and narrow lanes of Ophel the many noises of the Upper City were almost indistinguishable. But the silence of the starlit night was broken at intervals by a long-drawn sound that came from the Royal Palace lying a short distance to the north on the temple-crowned heights of Mount Moriah. A shiver ran through the veins of Shebna reclining in the depths of his litter, for the sound was one of evil presage. In the courts of the Palace, hundreds of women, according to ancient custom, wailed mournfully throughout the night because of the fate, worse than death, that awaited the Beautiful One of the B'ne-David, the Princess Nehushta.

CHAPTER VIII

NEHUSHTA'S heart was torn with sorrow, for she could not, because of her promise to Amon, dry the tears of her mother or lessen the grief of her father. In the daytime, restless and inconsolable, she wandered through the Palace and the gardens, weeping gently when the young gazelles came to feed out of her hand. At night the wailing of the women in the courts filled her soul with an unutterable horror, for it seemed to her that being yet alive she was already as one that is dead. Her mother, the Queen Hephzibah, could only weep whenever she came to her for comfort. She was a tender-hearted and still beautiful woman, but weak and superstitious and once she told Nehushta that she had secretly sent rich gifts to the shrine of the Lady Ashtoreth, for though she did not openly worship the Queen of Heaven because of the King, still in her inmost heart she feared that the Goddess might be offended because Nehushta had been born at the full of the moon and yet did not acknowledge her divinity. Once also Nehushta penetrated into the harem, and the women who dwelt there pitied her sorrow greatly and tried to comfort her with gifts of sweetmeats and luscious fruits. The inmates of the harem were not many in number, for if the King had taken other wives it had only been because he longed for a man-child to come after him.

In the three days that followed her father's decision Nehushta was lifted up to the highest summits of happiness and hope, and she descended into the nethermost depths of misery and despair. At times the knowledge of the Prince's secret love for her overwhelmed all other thoughts and feelings and then, with an abrupt transition, would come a black anguish bringing in its train a storm of passionate weeping that left her white, exhausted and trembling. During those three days the promised message did not come from the Prince, and doubts began to torture her. She feared lest some unforeseen obstacle should have arisen to make his scheme impracticable. When she tried to imagine to herself what would happen if Amon's endeavours to save her proved unsuccessful, her thoughts seemed to become involved in a thick black cloud, for she had long decided that, if all else failed, she would never reach the Great King alive. And then suddenly, when she had almost given up all hope, a message came.

On the morning of the fourth day after her meeting with Amon in the garden, it was said in the Palace that the departure of the envoys for Lachish had been fixed for the following day. The rumour reached her through Hadassah, her favourite attendant, and she withdrew to her room in despair. The previous day she had confided to Hadassah that she expected a message which would make her happy, and now, when she had only been a little while on her couch in the abandonment of her grief, the girl rushed in to her flushed with excitement, for she felt that her words would bring happiness to her beloved mistress. A soldier of the *Gibborim* had brought a message to the eunuch who kept the door leading from the women's

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apartments to the royal gardens, and had asked that it should be conveyed to the Princess Nehushta. And these were the words of the message : "Greetings from the Prince Amon to the Lady Nehushta. She who was sought is now found, and all will be well."

One drop of bitterness only now remained in Nehushta's cup, and that was that she could not share her knowledge with her father and her mother, for now the conviction became rooted in her mind that all would indeed be well, and that within a few days she would return safely to the Palace. And not even the awe-inspiring and heartrending scene which took place that night had power to depress her mind. Every time that some little doubt arose, it seemed as if a voice within her repeated aloud the words of the long-expected message : "She who was sought is now found, and all will be well !"

That evening, between sunset and dark, accompanied by all the chief officers of State and the Princes of the B'ne-David and escorted by *Gibborim* and Carians, the King had gone up to the Temple. There, in accordance with the ancient privilege of the Kings of Judah, he had with his own hand sacrificed and offered a young bull without blemish, and sprinkled its blood seven times before the Veil that hung in front of the Holy of Holies. And later, Nehushta, closely veiled and dressed in royal robes that glittered with gold, had been brought to bid him formal farewell in the Hall of Feasts, now denuded of all its rich hangings and many lights.

Outside, in the hot moonlit night, the women wailed continuously and mournfully. In the half-gloom of the Hall, lighted only by the torches held by two rows of priests, she advanced slowly to the ebony

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throne where her father sat clad in sackcloth and with uncovered head. At his side stood the Princes of the B'ne-David, and her heart gave a great leap as she saw among them Amon, upright and stern-faced. In front of the throne stood the High Priest in the white robes of penitence, with four attendant priests, and when she stood before them, he took seven doves, one after another, from a basket, and after having killed each one, by pinching its head with his thumbnail, he extended his hands, in which were held two of the slaughtered birds, over Nehushta's head, and uttered a prayer to absolve her from all ritual transgressions. And then, had it not been that she caught a look of reassurance and warning in Amon's eyes, she would have been unable to keep herself from flying into her father's arms and uttering words of comfort and of hope to soften the abandonment of his grief. For the King rose up from his throne and sat on the lowest step thereof. He rent his garments and sprinkled ashes upon his head, and wept aloud in bitter sorrow.

* * * * *

On the following morning, Amon, walking by Nehushta's litter through the stubble fields on the Plain of Rephaim, explained eagerly to the anxious Princess how he had succeeded in finding a substitute for her by redeeming a *Kedeshah* from the Temple of Ashtoreth. He spoke in Aramaic so that he might not be understood by the bearers or those who walked or rode near them.

"She rides in a litter close behind us, Princess, and Shaftan and I spent nearly the whole of yesterday instructing her how to speak and behave so that Sennacherib should not suspect that she is not of

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royal rank. He is not likely, however, to keep her very long with him, so that there is not much danger of detection on that score."

"Is she beautiful?" inquired the Princess, woman-like.

"Aye, Princess, to those who have never gazed upon the splendour of your beauty, she will indeed seem beautiful. She is but sixteen years old; a poor girl, the daughter of a shepherd dwelling in Gilead, who sold her because of her beauty to a life of shame. Her name is Neziach, a good omen, for it means Victory."

"Oh, Amon, how my heart grieved when the days passed and yet no message came from you!"

"Dear one! 'Tis I who must be blamed for the delay. I racked my brains in vain for two whole days until I bethought myself of confiding in Shaftan, my old friend and tutor, and the old fox suggested at once what should be done."

"And where do you think your Arab friends will attack us?" asked the Princess, after a few moments' silence. "I shall be so afraid when I find myself alone among those wild men, though you say they are friendly to us, Amon."

"Then let your heart rejoice, light of my life, for you will not be alone. At first I had thought of allowing Shaftan to be captured with you so that he might protect you and watch over you, but after we had discussed the matter further we decided it would be better if I allowed myself to be captured and Shaftan will return with the news to Jerusalem and disclose the truth to the King, so that all may be ready to hide you in the Palace for a time when we return, beloved. You ask where Amru will attack us. I cannot tell

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for certain, except that it will be a short time before we reach Hebron this evening."

The caravan was now abreast of a ridge on which stood a high tower overlooking Bethlehem, while behind them could be seen the last glimpses of the domes, walls and towers of the Holy City. With a few words of farewell to Nehushta, Amon mounted his horse, which a slave was leading, and rode back a little distance to speak to Shaftan.

The caravan was not very large, less than a hundred people all told. The military escort was small, for though it was customary for the soldiers accompanying such embassies to be permitted to return, they mistrusted Assyria too much in Jerusalem to run the risk of losing many defenders. A dozen archers and spearmen, two or three of whom were mounted, marched in the van, and an equal number guarded the rear. Although the greater part of the gold and silver tribute demanded by Sennacherib had been sent the same day directly to the royal treasuries at Nineveh, the envoys took with them a quantity of rich presents for the Great King at Lachish. Gold and silver vases, ivory, rich stuffs from Damascus, precious stones, spices from Arabia, and a beautifully-carved Phœnician throne of ivory, gold and ebony, with a seat of elephant hide. These gifts were carried on the backs of asses and camels, and next to them rode the blind King of Ekron in a curtained litter, borne on a milk-white camel from the royal stables. After him came the Princess's litter, the litters of her female attendants, among which was that of Neziach, her slaves, and four asses carrying a variety of rich apparel for her wear. Lastly came the remaining soldiers, headed by Shaftan.

Through the curtains of her litter, which were partly

drawn back on account of the excessive heat, Nehushta gazed at the scenery. On her left stretched a deep valley framing the purple mountains of Moab, shimmering with a thin heat haze, and occasional glimpses of the Salt Sea, sparkling like a sapphire in the heavy yellow sunshine. Soon they came to the Tomb of Rachel, and leaving the white houses and rich vineyards of Bethlehem on their left, the caravan reached the Pools of Solomon an hour later. The atmosphere had become scorching, and some of the slaves panted like parched dogs. It was hard to say whether all the heat came from the crevices in the burnt-up ground or from the sulphurous globe of the sun hanging in the yellow, low-lying sky that stretched over the landscape. A welcome halt was called under the walls of a fortress where dwelt the Guardians of the Pools, and in a very short time tents were erected in which the Princess, the envoys, Amon and Padi of Ekron rested for a while and refreshed themselves, while the soldiers and attendants made a frugal meal, sitting or lying beside their camels and horses.

Later in the afternoon they came to more open country. Wide and fertile valleys and low, terraced hills covered with arbutus and dwarf oaks lay round them, and everywhere deserted villages and half-garnered fields bore witness to the haste with which the inhabitants at the rumour of the coming of the Assyrians had fled for safety to the fortified cities. The hot, weary hours dragged along, and still there were no signs of the attacking Bedawin. Nehushta's heart grew heavier and heavier within her, and at last, just after they had passed through Beth-zur and had arrived at a wild and deserted portion of the road, she was unable to restrain her impatience any longer and sent

for Amon. Dismounting from his horse, in a few moments he stood at her side.

"Amon," cried the Princess with a terrified look in her eyes, "why don't they come? Can they mean to betray you by not keeping their promise?"

The Prince tried to reassure her, scanning the country through which they were now travelling, and pointing out how suitable it seemed for an ambush. The road had now become rocky and uneven and led up a deep valley running through a tangle of *wadis* and low hills, on one of which, far to the left, lay the mountain city of Halhul. A short distance ahead, on a small eminence situated at the mouth of one of the side valleys the figure of a solitary shepherd stood out sharply outlined against the blue sky, and as the foremost riders approached him he uttered a peculiar prolonged cry, which was answered from a farther hill. In an incredibly short time the caravan was surrounded by Arabs, who swarmed out of every gully and sprang from behind every rock, yelling and shouting their war-cries. Some were mounted on camels, and a much smaller number on horses, but the majority were afoot. Led by a tall, black-bearded man who sat his horse as if he were part of it, they came down on the caravan like an avalanche from the surrounding heights. Their long, striped burnouses floated in the wind, their faces were half hidden by the folds of their head-cloths, and their bronze lance-heads glittered in the sun's rays.

Only five people knew of the expected attack—Amon, Shaftan, the Princess, Neziach and Haruz, Amon's orderly, who had been given some hint of the plot and had been instructed to seize Padi's camel by the halter at the first signs of attack, and to fly with

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him out of earshot as rapidly as possible, even at the cost of cutting down one or two of the Arabs. But even if all had been expecting the attack they would have been unable to offer any serious resistance in the face of its suddenness and the overpowering numbers of the Arabs. At least two hundred Bedawin threw themselves with wild fury on the handful of soldiers and disarmed them in spite of their resistance with no worse result than a few more or less serious wounds on both sides. The slaves scattered wildly at the first alarm and hid themselves behind stones and rocks, and Nehushta's litter and those of her maidens were unceremoniously dropped by their bearers. Instantly drawing his sword, Amon assisted the Princess to rise and stood by her side, supporting her with his left arm. For a few moments the wild yells of the Arabs and the confusion of the *mêlée* caused dark doubts to arise in his mind concerning their ultimate intentions, for he did not know how far they were in the confidence of the black-bearded leader in whom he instantly recognized Amru. But his doubts were dispelled almost as quickly as they had arisen, for the Arab chief, pointing them out to his men, shouted, "Take them alive!" and immediately the Prince and Nehushta were surrounded by at least fifty strongly-armed tribesmen. To resist would have been useless folly even if they had wished to do so, and Amon sheathed his sword in token of submission.

Meanwhile the men who had attacked and disarmed the soldiers had retreated a little way up the side of the valley and stacked the captured arms on a little knoll. Others gathered round the treasure-laden animals shouting, "Ya Amru! Ya Amru! Booty for the Children of Jeruel!" and were proceeding to

unloosen the burdens from the animals' backs when the white-cloaked leader rode towards them and stopped them with an imperious gesture.

“Hearken to me, O dispensers of love and death !” he cried, and at the sound of his full, rich voice every Bedawi immediately stood rigid and silent, listening to the words of his chief. “You must forbear from dealing either for the sake of your father Amru, Sheikh of the Children of Jeruel ! This day do I discharge my debt to him who once spared my life; to him whom ye have called ‘The Sword of Jahveh.’ Listen, therefore, to my words and obey them. All these Children of Judah, with their women, their slaves, and their treasures, shall be free to depart whithersoever they will. For we have captured by the strength of our young men a richer prize than ye thought to take. — Behold !” and he pointed to the Princess who stood proudly by Amon’s side, “there stands the Princess Nehushta of the B’ne-David, and though her life shall be sacred to you, yet we shall demand a rich ransom for her freedom from the King of Judah, her father.” Loud murmurs greeted the Sheikh’s words as the Arabs gave expression to their disappointment at the prospect of losing so much rich booty, and their surprise at the turn of affairs : a surprise which showed that a great many of them at any rate knew nothing of the plot. But again an imperious gesture from Amru quelled all protests.

“As for thee,” he continued, pointing with his spear towards Amon, “thou art free to go with thy brothers or to stay with the Princess until she shall be redeemed. Thy life is in thy hands, neither will we take gold for thee. Thou shalt always be welcome in the tents of the Childrén of Jeruel !”

“Where the Princess Nehushta goes I go!” cried Amon proudly.

And suddenly, seeing that some of his followers were still inclined to murmur and cast threatening looks at the Prince, Amru plunged his hand into one of the bags that hung at his saddle, withdrew it full of salt and held it out to Amon. “Eat of my salt!” cried the Sheikh, and Amon eagerly took a few grains and placed them on his lips, giving some to Nehushta as well. Their lives henceforth were sacred, for no Bedawi would ever raise a finger against those who had eaten of their Chief’s salt. Quickly Nehushta was helped on to the back of a kneeling camel, while Amon was allowed to remount his horse. With wild shouts of triumph the tribesmen rallied round their leader, and in a few moments the Children of Jeruel had disappeared amid a cloud of dust down the side valley from which they had come, leaving the Hebrews dazed at the suddenness of their loss and irresolute as to what they should do next. Instinctively every one looked to Shaftan for guidance, for the envoys were men of peace, more used to negotiating treaties than to commanding soldiers. The old warrior immediately ordered the soldiers to gather together their arms, which had been left untouched where they had been stacked by the Bedawin, and while the few wounded soldiers bound their wounds, he called the three envoys round him and asked if they wished him to assume the leadership of the embassy, or if they had any suggestions to make.

“Nay, Shaftan; do thou deal with us as thou thinkest fit,” said Abiathar-ben-Chenaniah, the eldest of the messengers, who seemed in great distress. “Jahveh have mercy upon us! If we return to Jerusalem our Lord

the King will blame us for not having laid down our lives for the Princess, and if we continue on our way to Lachish the Great King will believe we are but making mock of him when we tell him what has happened and will surely put us to death."

"Then listen, O men of wisdom," said Shaftan, "and say whether my scheme is not a good one."

Among the crowd who stood round them were the four female attendants of Nehushta, who had jumped out of their litters in the first moments of the attack, and who were now talking excitedly and recounting their experiences. There was, however, another litter standing a little to one side. Going towards it Shaftan drew its curtains aside and a young and beautiful girl stepped out. Exclamations of surprise were heard, for none knew her, and her beauty was almost as great as that of the Princess.

"Seek not to understand things which are beyond you, friends," said Shaftan, "but remember only that what I am about to say has the approval of Prince Amon; and remember also that if you tell the story of what has happened, not one of you, high or low, will leave the Great King's camp alive." A visible shudder agitated the crowd of listeners. "Take, therefore, this young girl and dress her in the Princess's royal robes, and pay her all the homage due to a Princess of the B'ne-David. She is fair to look upon and comely, and to you all her name henceforth shall be Nehushta." It began to dawn on some of the members of the caravan that the attack was perhaps not so unexpected as had appeared, and the messengers looked at each other with silent comprehension, for it was clear that some influence was at work with which it would be best not to interfere.

“Swear, all of you,” cried Shaftan once more, “not to betray the secret of this day’s happenings, neither now nor on your return to Jerusalem. It is the wish of the Prince Amon.”

The slaves, soldiers and attendants, happy at the prospect of escaping so easily from death or capture, did not hesitate an instant in taking the required oath. Like one man they all shouted, “By Jahveh do we swear it, Lord Shaftan !” and the three messengers also readily agreed to Shaftan’s scheme.

“As for me,” said Shaftan, “I shall return at once to Jerusalem, seek out the King and make a report to him, and perchance, if you follow in all respects what I have enjoined upon you, you will hear no more of this when you return to Jerusalem. Farewell !”

Shaftan gave a peculiar loud whistle, at the sound of which Haruz appeared from behind a rock leading the King of Ekron’s camel, and rejoined the caravan. Hastily mounting his horse the old warrior galloped off in the direction of Jerusalem and was soon lost to sight.

CHAPTER IX

FOR the third time in four days the attempt to break the defence of Lachish at the Western Gate had failed. In the early afternoon the defenders had succeeded in setting on fire the battering-ram which had been pounding one of the flanking towers of the gate for several hours and the huge machine was now in flames. The air was filled with the stench of burning leather and wood. Here and there great wickerwork shields that served to protect the kneeling Assyrian archers lay flat on the ground, and some of them moved convulsively like gigantic insects in their death-throes, as the wounded soldiers tried to crawl from underneath them. At the foot of the gate itself a group of sappers ran about shrieking with agony and trying in vain to divest themselves of their thick padded robes, which had been set on fire by jets of burning pitch thrown from the walls.

Taking advantage of this temporary check in the attack, a stream of defenders made a sudden sortie from a side gate and pursued the fleeing besiegers half-way to the shelter of their camp. As they ran the Assyrians shouted filthy insults, and threw stones at the impaled Hebrews, some of whom still writhed in lingering agony on numerous tall stakes planted between the city walls and the camp. And when, towards sunset, the messengers of King Hezekiah arrived,

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an enormous confusion still reigned inside the camp in spite of the iron discipline of Assyria.

Long rows of camels'-hair tents extended in every direction, and on all sides a vast multitude of soldiers, drawn from every quarter of Asia, were busily occupied. Some were staunching the wounds received in that morning's attack, others cleaning their weapons or preparing their evening meal. A veritable Babel of tongues sounded on all sides, for Assyria recruited her troops from all parts of her huge empire. Dogs barked, sheep and goats bleated, pigs squealed, horses whinnied, and sounds of music and singing were wafted on the evening breeze from afar. Priests offered the evening sacrifice before the sacred standards of Ashur borne aloft on a war-chariot, orderlies and couriers rushed hither and thither giving and receiving orders; and along almost every tented pathway women of loose life, painted and bejewelled, sought to attract the passers-by into their small tents, which were distinguished by a roughly-embroidered figure of Ishtar on the door-flap. Little attention was paid to the Hebrews, who were escorted by a number of spearmen, for almost every day batches of prisoners, embassies from distant cities, or princes, or terrified deputations from beleaguered towns anxious for peace at any price, arrived in the camp.

They came to a great enclosure where an enormous number of horses, donkeys and camels were stabled under sheds with open sides. Then long, serried rows of war-chariots with here and there the huge bulk of some battering-ram or other siege-machine. Suddenly their attention was arrested by a scene which made the blood of most of the Hebrews run cold. Outside a large tent stood two scribes with tablets in their hands,

and a few steps away the prisoners taken during the previous few days were being apportioned. Some, the strongest, were set aside to work as slaves or to be enlisted in the army of their new masters, while others, wounded or disabled, were doomed to death. A rough crowd of soldiers stood around the miserable wretches who were to die. They were led aside and made to kneel in a row. An executioner passed swiftly along and with a single blow of a heavy club smashed in each skull. They fell without a cry and immediately the various soldiers who had captured them rushed forward, threw themselves savagely on them, uttering beast-like cries of jubilation and shouting vile insults. They committed unspeakable mutilations on the wretched corpses, hacked off their heads with their swords, put them into baskets and rushed off to another tent in front of which there was already a ghastly heap of severed heads. Each soldier dictated his name to the scribe in attendance, mentioned his company and regiment and retired with a pride in proportion to the number of horrible trophies he had added to the heap and for which he would later be rewarded.

The Hebrew soldiers, inured to the ordinary cruelties of warfare, were not much affected by these still more horrible cruelties for which the Assyrians were feared all over Asia. But the messengers, who were men of peace, were visibly moved and tried to surround the women's litters so as to hide the sight from their eyes. The caravan had been received at the entrance to the camp by one of the royal eunuchs, Nabu-shallim, and he laughed at the emotion of the Hebrews. "We Assyrians are not so squeamish over the cracking of a few prisoners' skulls, my Lords!" he said. "'Tis the

reason why the Great King's army is as unconquerable as the might of Ashur, for we show no mercy to the vanquished who have resisted us."

The caravan passed on until they reached the royal quarters, in the centre of which stood the King's great tent and his dining and cooking tents. The royal tent was easily distinguished from the surrounding ones by its size, the fineness of its brown camels'-hair covering and the dreaded standards of Ashur, the distant sight of which had been known to bring about instant submission in certain parts of Asia. They were raised aloft on poles of cypress-wood, plated with gold, and planted in front of the royal pavilion. In the cooking tent, which was open in front, numerous slaves were roasting whole sheep and kids for the royal table. A number of officials and eunuchs now took charge of the caravan instead of the escorting spearmen, and the women's litters were directed towards a large tent at some distance from the royal pavilion. Evening was fast falling, and at every instant there passed richly-apparelled officers followed by their orderlies, all going towards the royal quarters. Nabu-shallim said that an important council of war was to be held that night.

Next morning when the messengers were summoned to appear before the King they could not help noticing a certain embarrassment in the behaviour of those around them. Nabu-shallim, who again accompanied them, started to say something on two or three occasions and each time he stopped himself, and Jehoash, one of the messengers, fancied he saw a commiserating look in the eunuch's eyes. And when the eunuch noticed the condition of the King of Ekron he looked still more grave and inquired the reason of his blind-

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ness. The explanation given by the messengers, together with their exculpation of King Hezekiah, did not appear very convincing to the Assyrian and he did not hesitate to say so.

The royal tent was entirely lined with costly stuffs and the floor was covered with priceless Babylonian carpets. It was filled with officials and soldiers, and at the far end, on a kind of heavy throne on wheels, sat Sennacherib, the Great King. The messengers were followed by a number of their slaves and attendants carrying baskets filled with a choice selection of gifts, and when the middle of the tent was reached they knelt and kissed the ground. Padi alone remained standing, for he could not see the King.

Once more the messengers noticed that the feeling of awkward restraint which seemed to permeate the atmosphere around them had become still more marked. And instead of being bidden by the King or by one of his officials to rise, as was often done to the ambassadors of a submitting power, they were allowed to remain kneeling while Sennacherib, with studied insult, took not the slightest notice of them. The Great King appeared instead to be entirely absorbed in the display of some rich silken stuffs which were being unrolled for his inspection by a misshapen little man, in whom, to their great astonishment, two of the messengers immediately recognized the Edomite Bela, who was well known to many people in Jerusalem and at the Hebrew Court, and was considered to be a dangerous intriguer. While the messengers waited on their knees they were able to get a clear impression of the King's appearance.

Sennacherib was a tall, heavy-looking man with a strong sensual face. He had great hairy hands and

an enormously thick chest. His nose was strongly aquiline with fleshy, curved nostrils. The lips were full and red and the upper one, protruding slightly, helped to give a disdainful and almost sneering expression to his face. His eyes were black, showing very little white, and surmounted by heavy arched brows. His thick, glossy black hair was arranged in two rows of curls, falling in profusion over his neck and shoulders, and his long, square-cut beard was carefully curled and oiled. His hands rested on the arms of the throne and he ill concealed a sardonic smile which appeared still further to accentuate his cruel expression. His robe was elaborately embroidered, and on his head he wore a mitre-shaped cap of blue and white woollen stuff, which was held in place by a broad band studded with gold rosettes and tied at the back, the loose ends falling over his shoulders. Heavy rings of gold adorned his ears, and bracelets of the same metal, with lions' heads, encircled his arms. A short sword with a carved scabbard and hilt of ivory and gold lay across his knees. Two eunuchs stood behind him incessantly waving huge fans of ostrich feathers.

It was not till an appreciable length of time had elapsed that he deigned to notice the Hebrews. He addressed them in abrupt terms, asking them roughly what their mission was. Abiathar, who held in his hand a roll of papyrus bound with a blue cord, answered him in Aramaic.

"O Great King, Abiathar-ben-Chenaniah, thy servant and the dust of thy feet, bows himself seven times seven times at the feet of the King of the World and says: 'Behold, I bring a letter and gifts from the King of Judah for the King my Lord!'"

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Sennacherib made a slight sign and one of the officials stepped forward, took the roll from Abiathar's hand, unrolled it and read out in a loud voice the message of Hezekiah, which was written in Aramaic, the commonest language for diplomatic communications.

“To the King my Father, the Great King, King of the World, King of the Four Quarters, King of Assyria, Protector of the Truth and Helper of the Weak, thy Son Hezekiah sends greeting and says :

“Peace be to the King my Father ! May there be peace to the Pure One thy Queen, to thy Ladies, to the Princes thy sons, to thy mighty chiefs, all of them, to thy soldiers, to thy chariots, to thy cavalry which are in thy power, and peace be to all thy lands exceedingly ! May Ashur and Jahveh bestow health of mind, health of body, length of days and long years of reign upon the Lord of Kings, the King of the World, my Lord !

“Because evil counsellors have perverted my understanding and wicked princes have sought to lead me astray from the path of faithfulness to thee, behold, I have broken the oaths which my father swore unto Assyria and I have offended thee. My country is made desolate, my cities are burned with fire, my land is overrun with strangers, and my people are wasted by the sword. Ashur, thy Lord, hath made strong thy name. Thou hast put forth thy hand and taken the kingdoms and the spoil and the booty thereof.

“But because in the goodness of thy heart thou hast confirmed me in my Kingdom I have sent thee my servants bearing gifts, and I have willingly accepted the burden of tribute which thou hast been pleased to lay upon me, and which I have sent to thy royal city

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of Nineveh. Likewise, I send now to thee Padi, King of Ekron, whom I have released at thy bidding, that he may be faithful unto thee and serve thee all the days of his life. And lastly I have also given unto thee, according to thy request, the fruit of my body, the royal daughter of my blood, even the Princess Nehushta, the Pure Lily, the Beautiful One of the B'ne-David, the fame of whose beauty spreadeth over all the lands of the world.

“Behold thou art my Father and my Lord, I am thy Servant and thy Son, the Land of Judah is thy land, and my house is thy house! May Jahveh bring peace upon thee and upon thy royal house!”

There was a dead silence for a few moments at the conclusion of the reading, and then Padi suddenly took a few groping steps forward and held his hands out in blind imploration.

“Justice, O Great King!” he cried in impassioned tones, “justice for me and revenge upon him who hath deprived thy faithful servant of the light of day! Justice upon Hezekiah of Judah whose prophets make a mock of thy mighty power and of thee!”

The heart of Abiathar seemed to stand still and he looked anxiously at his two companions. They had feared indeed that trouble would arise concerning Padi's blindness, but now they felt with increasing force a sense of something hostile and terrifying in the very air around them—something they could not account for. The Great King spoke in cold, even tones as does one who is ready to do bare justice but no more.

“What have ye to say, O servants of the King of Judah?”

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“Be merciful to us, O Great King, for our Lord is not accountable for what hath befallen the King of Ekron. He was imprisoned, it is true, but King Hezekiah had given orders that Padi should be dealt with as a King is dealt with. The man who ill-treated him thus is the Vizier Shebna, he who has always counselled resistance to thy might and reliance upon Egypt. He caused Padi to be thrown into a foul dungeon without the King's knowledge and ordered his eyes to be sewn up so that he hath lost the sight thereof.” The three Hebrews once more knelt down and kissed the ground.

“So,” said Sennacherib after a moment's pause, “your master is not even powerful enough to rule his own servants and he would resist me !” The King laughed slowly, and the sound of his mirth froze the blood in the veins of the three messengers.

“Know ye not, O Hebrews, that I am ruler in the name of Ashur, the Mighty Lord of War before whom all the other gods of the nations are powerless ? Is it not known even among your mountains, O men of little importance, that I am the Beloved of Ishtar of Nineveh, and that Ishtar of Arbela fights by my side ? Know ye not, O dogs,” went on Sennacherib, his voice gradually rising to an angry roar as his rage increased, “that Nebo hath given me His wisdom to see into the scheming hearts of men and kings ? ’Tis true that I told you some days since that in the all-embracing pity of my Majesty I would confirm your master in his kingdom, and that I would be pleased to accept his tribute. But I knew nothing then of what had been done unto Padi, my faithful servant. Naught had been said respecting the messages of treason which your King is even now

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exchanging with those makers of mischief the Egyptians, who are sleeping at Zalu overcome by the deadly fear of the wrath of my heart. But Ashur, Marduk and Nebo have given me eyes to see all over the world and ears to hear the secret thoughts of treachery concealed in the hearts of kings! And Shamas, the Great Judge of Heaven and Earth, shall pronounce sentence upon you, O Hebrews!"

Dimly the messengers began to understand the nature of the hostility that surrounded them. In their hearts they knew that Bela the Edomite had come to Lachish bent on more evil business than the selling of rich stuffs.

"If there have been treachery, O Great King," cried Abiathar, rising up in agonized fear, "it is not on our side, as Jahveh liveth!" The old man stood up in the middle of the tent, and though his heart was as water within him his features were calm and dignified. The other two messengers and the Hebrew slaves rallied instinctively round him, for they could read death or worse than death written on the Great King's face. "It is true that Egypt undertook to help us; but all in Jerusalem—King, prophets, priests and people—have long since ceased to expect any help from them and are ready to submit to thee and to acknowledge thy Majesty, O King of the World; neither hath our Lord sent any messages to the Egyptians."

"Enough of lies and treacherous dealing!" cried the King, his brows black as night with rage. He turned to a eunuch standing near the throne. "Balasi, let the messenger of Hezekiah be brought before me."

A villainous-looking man was dragged into the middle

of the tent by an officer. His hands were tied behind his back and a rope was round his neck, by which the Assyrian threw him to the ground with a jerk.

"Where was this man captured, Balasi?" asked the King.

"He was captured as he was passing through Gaza yesterday morning, O Lord of Kings," answered the eunuch.

"What found ye on him?" continued the King.

"This, O Great King," said the officer, holding up a small rolled-up piece of papyrus. "This was found hidden in his bosom, Lord."

"Read it!" commanded the King.

The officer unrolled the small piece of papyrus and handed it to Balasi, who read out the following words: "Hezekiah of Judah to his brother the Pharaoh Sebnak of Bubastis, greetings. If I yield to Assyria it is not from the heart. Let my brother not be disheartened, but let him go forward with a valiant heart!"

Stupefaction and despair were depicted on the faces of the Hebrew messengers as they heard these incomprehensible words. They felt that they were in the meshes of some devilish plot, a plot in which they knew instinctively that Bela played a part, but they also knew that they could say nothing which would bring conviction to the man who held their lives in his power.

"Hear now the sentence of Shamash, O Sons of Lies!" said the Great King. "The three of you shall return to your master with an answer to his message. Not less than three of you will be needed to carry my message!" A slow, gloating smile spread over the King's features. "And this is the message I shall send to a rebellious dog: 'Behold, my hand

taketh the tribute and the gifts because of the treachery of Judah against my Majesty, but by the Might of Ashur my Father do I swear it, there shall be no peace between Judah and Assyria until Jerusalem lieth in ruins and my foot treadeth upon the neck of Hezekiah ! ' ' "

The messengers made one last, despairing attempt to convince the King that they had no knowledge of any negotiations with the Egyptians. They threw themselves on the ground and dragged themselves on their stomachs to the foot of the throne.

" Mercy, O Great King ! Have mercy, O King of the World ! " they cried.

But all was in vain. Sennacherib stood up. His brow had grown serene again and a volcanic energy seemed to emanate from his whole person. He turned to Nabuna'id, one of the Tartans who stood on the left of the throne.

" I go to Ekron this morning with my guards to see how the siege prospers. Let them be in readiness at the North Gate of the camp within half an hour. Seize these men," he went on, pointing to the wretched messengers. " Let their slaves and attendants be impaled, and let them be brought at once with their soldiers to the North Gate of the camp so that justice may be done upon them ! " "

Instantly the scene within the tent became one of tragical horror. Abiathar, Pedaiah and Jehoash were made to stand up, their hands were bound behind their backs, and their turbans were torn off. The wretched slaves and attendants were dragged out of the tent and led off to the terrible impaling stakes. Sennacherib stalked down the middle of the tent and the Hebrew messengers were dragged after him. At the

door of the pavilion stood the royal chariot, gorgeously adorned with gold and rich trappings and drawn by two fiery, coal-black stallions. A large parasol sheltered the King from the sun's rays, and two eunuchs with fly-flaps clung to each side of the chariot. The Hebrews were brutally thrown to the ground and the Great King, stepping on their prostrate bodies, mounted the chariot accompanied by the Captain of the Royal Guards. At a word from the driver the horses darted off like an arrow from a bow.

Abiathar, Pedaiah and Jehosh were then dragged through the jeering camp to the plain beyond the North Gate. On its flat, scorched surface the Assyrian royal guards, mounted on picked horses, armed with swords and lances, their helmets and cuirasses glittering in the blinding rays of the sun, had begun to form in line. In the meanwhile the Hebrew soldiers, whose weapons had been taken away from them when they arrived in the camp the previous evening, were seized without a struggle and brought to the same place. The royal chariot came dashing out of the gate, flashed past the Guards, who saluted by raising their lances, and stopped close to the Hebrews. Behind it ran eight or ten huge, lion-hunting dogs with rough black coats, reddish manes and pendant jowls. Sennacherib, speaking from his chariot, addressed himself to the three messengers.

"Hezekiah shall not say that I put defenceless soldiers to death as if they were slaves! Your men are free to return to Judah now if they can outrun my trusty hounds!" And the King gave a great laugh. "Call upon Jahveh, O soldiers! Perchance He will hear you even though He be, as I have heard, a God who dwells in the mountains!"

The soldiers were unbound and started to run wildly. The flat, unbroken plain that lay at the foot of the hill on which Lachish rose offered scarcely any shelter anywhere beyond a few solitary trees and rocks, but the fear of death lent wings to their feet, and when Sennacherib gave a sign to let the great beasts loose they had already gone some distance. With a deep baying the hounds sped away and in a short time they had brought down practically all the wretched fugitives. Sennacherib then turned to the messengers who stood watching the scene with feelings of horror.

“And now shall ye hear the sentence of Shamash, the great Judge of the Gods, O Messengers of Hezekiah ! Thou,” said the King, pointing to Abiathar, “forasmuch as thou hast spoken many words thou shalt not speak again !” At a sign from the King two executioners stepped forward, threw the old man to the ground, and in an instant, with fiendish skill, they tore his tongue out. “And thou,” went on Sennacherib, pointing to Pedaiah, “forasmuch as thou hast looked upon my Majesty thy eyes shall close in darkness while thou gazest upon it !”

Pedaiah was forced to kneel at the side of the royal chariot, his head was pulled back by a soldier, and Sennacherib, with the point of his spear, himself put out his eyes. “And thou,” said the Great King, turning finally to the trembling Jehoshaphat, “thou shalt return to Judah, but on thy brothers’ backs !” The executioners stepped forward once more and with four deft strokes of a heavy sword they severed his hands and feet.

The noonday sun poured down a deluge of fire on the plain of Lachish and its rays fell on a thick line of shining helmets and flashing spears, rolling chariots

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and prancing steeds. The line wavered and then moved slowly northwards amid clouds of blinding dust, leaving behind it on the torrid fields three solitary figures. One groped blindly with outstretched hands towards another who strove in vain to speak. And yet a third lay on the ground amid splashes of blood.

CHAPTER X

THE moon floated serenely like a great disk of shining silver over the gnarled and blistered wastes of Jeshimon. The silence of the desert night was broken only by the distant howling of jackals and hyenas, and the short, sharp crackling of the thorn-fire that burned in the midst of the Bedawi camp. Five whole days had elapsed since the attack on the Hebrew caravan: days that had seemed to hold within their short span eternities of happiness for Amon and Nehushta. And now, outside the little tent which had been assigned to her by the kindly nomads, the Prince held her in his arms and listened entranced to the tender tones of her voice as she whispered of her supreme content and joy.

“My Amon! My beloved! Would that we were not bound to return to the strife and turmoil of Jerusalem! How gladly would I wander on for ever with thee in the wilderness!”

“Nehushta! Life of my soul! My sister and my spouse! Thou hast ravished my heart so that each day that shall pass before our marriage feast shall seem as a year! And I, too, would gladly wander forth with thee! Yet Jahveh calleth to us from His Holy City, and we must return for the sake of our children and the children of our children who shall sit on the throne of David!”

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“ Oh, if the anger of Jahveh should strike me so that I were taken from thee, beloved ! I would plunge a dagger in my breast, for I cannot live without thee ! ”

As if agitated by some obscure presentiment of evil Nehushta clung convulsively to Amon, and the Prince kissed her tenderly before she withdrew to her tent outside which, wrapped in his military cloak, he would lie until sunrise.

“ Good night, beloved ! ” whispered Nehushta. “ Set me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thine arm ! And may Jahveh bless thee and grant thee life ! ”

When Amon and Nehushta, surrounded by the B'ne-Jeruel, had disappeared from the sight of the Hebrew caravan near Hebron Amru had ridden straight up beside the Prince and had renewed his promises of absolute faithfulness to the undertaking which he had given him in Jerusalem. The Bedawin led their willing captives down wild and precipitous *wadis* and shortly before moonrise they reached their camp in the bottom of the Wadi El-Ghor, a great valley running down to the Salt Sea. They were greeted with shouts of joy by the warriors who had remained behind, and by the women who gathered round to examine with great curiosity the rich apparel of the beautiful young Princess.

After the Sheikh had explained once more that the captives were not to be treated as such but as honoured guests, Nehushta was led off to the tent of Amru's wife, and there, in accordance with the Sheikh's instructions, she was soon transformed into the semblance of a Bedawi woman. She gave her costly garments to Ayouna, the Sheikh's wife, and Ayouna herself helped her to stain the ivory-white skin of her face, neck and

arms, and to paint on her features the tattoo-marks proper to her tribe until Nehushta could easily have passed for an exceptionally beautiful girl of the B'ne-Jeruel. Meanwhile Amru explained to Amon that the Bedawin intended to reach Jerusalem by a round-about way so as to avoid any possible complications, or any encounters with stray bands of Assyrians that might have come up into the highlands to forage. They would go down to the fertile gardens and palm-groves of Engeddi and thence they would go up by the terrible ascent of Ziz and through the Wilderness of Tekoa. Thus they would approach the Holy City by the Valley of Fire so as to enter it through one of the less-frequented eastern gates.

The following day near sunset they had encamped near the top of the pass that led down to Engeddi, and on the morning of the third day Amon and Nehushta stood on the edge of a precipice and gazed in breathless wonder at the beautiful scene spread out before them. After two days spent among the scorching desolation of the desert their eyes were gladdened by the sight of a river of verdure that seemed to burst from the rock itself, some four hundred and fifty feet below them, and to spread fanwise into a rich oasis of palm groves and gardens reaching down to the shores of the Salt Sea. The newly-risen sun diffused glorious golden hues upon the waters, whose surface was rippled by an eastern breeze, while a dense evaporation rose and filled the whole abyss of the sea, spreading a gossamer veil of mist in front of the red wall of Moab.

The B'ne-Jeruel had spent two days amid the delights of Engeddi, and their last encampment was made in the Wilderness of Tekoa on the evening of the fifth day after the attack on the caravan. Next

day about noon the tents were struck, and some little time before sunset as they filed down the Kidron Valley the towering walls of the Holy City rose before them. A great emotion filled the hearts of Amon and Nehushta, for they would now have to part for a little while, nor did they yet know what success had attended the Princē's daring plot to deceive the King of Assyria.

Before leaving Jerusalem it had been arranged that when Shaftan returned to the Holy City he would immediately disclose, but to the King only, the way in which Amon had contrived to save the Princess Nehushta from the dread fate that threatened her. Arrangements were to be made to have her, as well as one or two of the women of the B'ne-Jeruel, smuggled into the Queen-Mother's apartments in the guise of attendants. A swift Bedawi runner had therefore been dispatched that morning from the camp with a message from Amon to Shaftan, advising him of their arrival that same evening. The B'ne-Jeruel were to enter the city on the north by the Fish Gate, near which lay the barracks of the Arab mercenaries. Amon, accompanied by Nehushta and two of the Bedawi women, entered by the Horse Gate, which led directly to the Palace enclosure. The short twilight had already faded into the semi-darkness of early evening when they entered the Gate of the Couriers and passed into the great court of the Palace. Officials, soldiers, priests and slaves were constantly passing in and out, and though many recognized and greeted the Prince he did not stop, for he was anxious that Nehushta should reach the shelter of the Palace as quickly as possible.

It is necessary to give some account of this court

because of the many stirring events of which it was the scene within the following weeks. At its south-eastern corner rose a high tower next to which was the Gate of the Couriers. On the northern side there was a single gate opposite the Gate of the Couriers, and known as the Gate of the Guards. The eastern side was almost entirely occupied by the Hall of Judgment, and on the western side rose the Palace buildings. Starting from the southern end of these one came first to the more public parts of the Palace, projecting into the court. Then came the principal front with a flight of steps guarded by stone lions, and a portico leading to the inner court. Beyond the Palace lay the House of Pharaoh's Daughter and between it and the Palace there was a rectangular space, at the western side of which a small private door led directly into the King's apartments, at the back of which lay the women's apartments. The Chief Eunuch and two slaves holding lighted torches stood at this small door, and with a silent glance of gratitude Nehushta and the two women disappeared into the Palace.

When the messengers had departed with the gifts for Sennacherib the general feeling of the population of Jerusalem was one of agitation and uncertainty mingled with a certain frivolity now that they thought all danger of attack by Assyria was past. But seven days had gone by ; no definite news of the result of the mission had come, although various wild reports of great movements on the part of the Assyrians, and even of the fall of Lachish, were in circulation, and a feeling of panic was beginning to make itself felt in the Holy City. All kinds of rumours ran rife in the bazaars. It was said that the Arab mercenaries were on the point of revolt, that the Assyrians were marching

on Jerusalem, and that the Egyptians were at last moving against the Assyrians.

The day after Amon's return was one of scorching heat. The sun seemed to pour down a rain of fire, and the desert wind was like the breath of a white-hot furnace. At noon the streets and lanes were almost deserted, although work was still being carried on at various points on the walls and towers, which were being strengthened in every possible way. And then suddenly a shouting and excited multitude filled all the streets leading down to the Dung Gate and swarmed up the great stairway by the side of the Pool of Siloam. One of the soldiers belonging to the escort of the messengers had come in at the Dung Gate, and it was said that he brought news of a terrible disaster. He was immediately taken to the house of the Grand Vizier Eliakim, and there in a few words he gave an account of what had happened so far as he knew it.

When the Assyrians had set their dogs on the Hebrew soldiers outside their camp at Lachish, being a fleet runner, this man had fled like the wind and had managed to hide himself in a disused cistern, from the shelter of which he watched the Assyrian guards ride off northwards with Sennacherib, while the dogs, gorged with human flesh, returned to the camp. He did not dare to leave his hiding-place, however, until darkness had fallen. When he did creep out he heard moans interspersed with Hebrew words and came upon the wretched messengers, whose fate until then he ignored. They had been left on the ground and had managed to crawl a few hundred yards to the shelter of some trees, Jehoash being carried on the back of Pedaiah, who was himself led by Abiathar. They had suffered endless tortures from their wounds and

from thirst, but now, helped by the soldier, the three men managed to get up into the foothills that night and spent a few hours in a village which had been sacked and burnt by the Assyrians. Mutilated corpses lay everywhere, but in a shed they found some food, which enabled them to proceed slowly next morning through the devastated and desolate country. During the day Jehoash had died from exhaustion and loss of blood. A little farther on, the soldier and the two remaining messengers were able to obtain some asses, on which they rode as far as Etam. There the two messengers had remained to rest for a day, and the soldier had come on to bring the evil news to Jerusalem.

When questioned he could only give a confused account of what had really happened. None of the soldiers had been present in the tent when the messengers were received by Sennacherib, so that he knew nothing of the causes of the massacre. Abiathar could no longer speak except by signs, and as for the blinded Pedaiah, in whose empty eye-sockets the heat and the flies had set up a violent inflammation, he had been unable to learn much from him. He had, however, seen some of the slaves and attendants who had formed part of the caravan impaled as he was led out of the Assyrian camp.

A flame of rage and indignation swept through Jerusalem when this terrible story became known. A shouting multitude invaded the Temple court and surrounded the Palace gates, crying out for vengeance against Assyria. Hope in Egypt revived, and that night no crowd howled outside the gates of Shebna's Palace. But the Vizier did not exult in his inmost heart, for he could not foresee as yet what the final result of his cunning schemes might be. The King

had been overjoyed at the restoration of his daughter, and in an interview with Amon on the night of his arrival the latter had revealed to him the secret of his love for the Princess and the fact that it was returned. Hezekiah had pledged himself to give him Nehushta to wife as soon as the Assyrians should depart from Judah, even though a certain amount of diplomacy might be necessary to prevent the news of her return from spreading too far or too soon. But now, naturally attributing the terrible consequences of Sennacherib's anger to his discovery of the trick that had been played upon him, and fearing that the very thing which he had sacrificed the flesh of his flesh to avoid would be brought about, the King became violently incensed against Amon, and it was only with great difficulty that the Prince and Shaftan succeeded in persuading him to continue to keep the matter secret from all and to wait at least until the two messengers should return to Jerusalem to tell the full story of the King of Assyria's treachery.

Ever since the night when he had seen Bela in the company of Shebna in the Temple of Ashtoreth, Shaftan's dislike and suspicion of the Vizier had not diminished.

"I feel it within me, Prince," he told Amon that night as they sat in the Prince's house, discussing the news brought by the fugitive soldier, "that either Shebna or Bela have had something to do with this business. You remember the words we overheard in the Temple of Ashtoreth that night: 'I will do thy bidding at any cost'? It is clear to me that Bela had undertaken to do something for Shebna in return for getting the *Kedeshah* back again into his clutches."

“But what could either Bela or Shebna do?” asked Amon.

“Bela might have undertaken to carry some treasonable message to the Assyrians,” remarked Shaftan, “and of a truth he is no longer in Jerusalem.”

“How know you that?” asked Amon quickly.

“I sent a trusted slave of mine to his house two days ago with a message, saying that I was in need of some chain armour from Arabia, for you know the Edomite trades in most things, but the gatekeeper replied that his master was gone abroad out of Jerusalem.” The words of Shaftan did not help to comfort the Prince or to drive away the deep gloom of his soul.

“My heart misgives me, old friend,” he said, “that the reason for this treachery can only be that Senacherib discovered that he had been tricked. For did not the King send him great gifts and agree to all he asked? Who knows but what Neziach betrayed our secret?”

“Nay, nay, boy,” cried Shaftan, laying a kindly hand on the Prince’s shoulder, “grieve not before we know the truth, for I am certain that that was not the reason. It is true that Neziach is but a *Kedeshah*, but she has a kindly heart, as you saw during the few hours she spent in your house. She, too, had loved a young shepherd of Gilead, she told me, before her father sold her into shame, and when you explained to her that what you wanted her to do would be the means of saving the young Princess Nehushta, whom you loved, I saw the tears start into her eyes as she promised to help you. Now that she can never know the pure love for which her soul hungered, what matters it to her that she should delay for a while her entrance into the shame-

less life of the *Kedeshah* to share the luxuries of Sennacherib's tent, even if she have to enter that life later in Assyria? As for the remainder of the people who accompanied the caravan they all feared too much for their lives to say anything. You should have seen how gladly they welcomed my suggestion to let Neziach take the Princess's place! It is barely possible, however," continued Shaftan thoughtfully, "that the King of Ekron may have overheard some of my words, although Haruz had orders to keep him well out of earshot. In truth, I think it much more probable that Padi's condition is likely to have been the cause of Sennacherib's anger," concluded Shaftan, as if 'the right explanation had occurred to him at last.

"Pray Jahveh your words are true, Shaftan," exclaimed Amon, "because if it be so, even if the Assyrians come, Nehushta will be safe, since that accursed dog who rules over them will think that he already has her in his power. What think you, Shaftan?" continued the Prince, after a few moments' silence, "if the Assyrians come up against Jerusalem, can we hold out as long as did Samaria?"

"Aye, and longer, Prince!" answered the old warrior after a few moments' reflection. "I doubt very much whether Sennacherib will be able to spare two years to take Jerusalem, especially now that he has obtained the gold and silver, which is all that those accursed spoilers and robbers of Assyrians care for; besides, trouble may always arise for him in Babylon. Last year, as you know, after he had crushed Mero-dach-baladan on the bloody field of Kish, he set Bel-ibni on the throne of Babylon. This Bel-ibni was brought up in Nineveh, but at heart and by birth he is a Babylonian, they say. And there is not much love

lost between Babylonians and Assyrians!" concluded Shaftan with a hearty laugh.

Shaftan was very near to the truth in ascribing the disaster to the influence of Shebna or Bela, but he could not know with what infamous cunning the Vizier had worked to cover up every trace of his connection with his doubly treacherous plot. He had sent two messengers to the Egyptians. One had orders to proceed by way of the coast road and through Gaza, Shebna knowing full well that the chances were all in favour of his being captured and thus affording independent proof to the Assyrians of the King of Judah's treasonable correspondence. The other was told to take the more rapid and direct route through Hebron and Beersheba, and in addition this miserable wretch carried a private message to the Egyptian commander, saying: "Let my Lord put this messenger in a sure place whence he may not escape." A sure place was found underneath the desert sand.

As for Bela, the Edomite had arrived at the Assyrian camp a full day before the Hebrew messengers and succeeded easily enough in obtaining an audience of Nabuna'id, the Turtanu of the Left. He gave the general to understand that the King of Judah was still carrying on negotiations with the Egyptians in spite of his apparent submission to Assyria. He asserted, further, that making use of the Vizier Shebna's Egyptian sympathies, which, by the way, the Assyrians were fully aware of, the King had caused him to send messengers to the Egyptians, trusting, if the correspondence were discovered, to be able to lay the blame on the Vizier and to say that he had acted without instructions.

Bela assured the interested Turtanu, however, that

the Vizier, recognizing at last that Egypt was in no condition to resist Assyria, had sent the messengers, much against his will, and that if the Assyrians came to Jerusalem he would do his best to assist them, trusting to the clemency and generosity of the Great King for his reward. Needless to say, the whole of this interview was immediately reported to King Sennacherib and his chief generals, and when the very next day Shebna's messenger, captured in Gaza, was brought into the camp, not a doubt was left in the minds of the Great King or his staff as to the double-faced behaviour of the King of Judah.

Bela's presence in the royal tent, however, was due to Sennacherib's wish to insult and offend the Hebrews as much as possible by appearing to ignore their very existence. But had the Edomite thought that any of them would live to return to Jerusalem instead of being put to death as he was at first led to believe when he heard of the Great King's furious explosion of anger against Judah, he would have been chary of letting himself be seen for fear his connection with the plot might be discovered on his return to Jerusalem.

It would have been difficult to conceive a more devilish scheme than Shebna's, nor could the Vizier easily have found a more cunning tool than the Edomite slave-dealer. Whether the Assyrians or the Egyptians conquered, whether Jerusalem stood or fell, it seemed that Shebna would triumph.

Before leaving the Prince's house Shaftan informed him that he would do well to use his position and influence to keep a strong watch on the Vizier, while he himself would keep a watchful eye on the Edomite.

"Litters have been sent to Etam this day to bring Pedaiah and Abiathar back to Jerusalem, and to-morrow

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at latest we shall know what really happened in the camp at Lachish. So fare you well, O Prince, and be not disheartened, for you will see that my words are true ones and that the Princess Nehushta will dwell in safety until she comes to your house as a bride."

CHAPTER XI

THE two mutilated envoys had been brought into the royal apartments, and the King sat on a low divan mournfully watching the disfigured face of Pedaiah as he recounted the incidents of their reception by Sennacherib. By Pedaiah's side, listening in dumb agony, stood Abiathar-ben-Chenaniah. Long hours of suffering had made his features drawn and haggard, and tears dimmed his eyes as he looked at the saddened monarch with the reproachful expression of a dog that has been unjustly beaten. For nearly three centuries his fathers before him had lived at the Court of the B'ne-David and served them faithfully, and the old man's gentle soul was bitterly grieved at the thought that his King should have betrayed his trust in him by sending him on his fatal mission. There were present in the chamber Achimelek-ben-Jotham, the King's uncle; Amon and Shaftan; the three Viziers, Eliakim, Shebna and Joach; the Carian Commander Theokhares, and the High Priest.

All exclaimed in surprise when they heard of the presence of Bela in the Assyrian camp, for the Edomite's reputation was universally bad in Jerusalem. From that moment Shaftan's gaze became firmly fixed on Shebna's coarse features. As for Amon, his mind grew calmer as the messenger proceeded with his story, without any allusion to Nehushta, until he came to

the incident of the supposed message of King Hezekiah. Astonishment and incredulity were depicted on the faces of the listeners, as they looked inquiringly at the King, who started up, trembling with emotion.

"As Jahveh liveth," he cried, "I know naught of this thing!" and instantly he turned towards Shebna. "Hadst thou aught to do with the sending of this message, O Shebna?"

The Vizier angrily repudiated the suggestion.

"Live for ever, O King! Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing against thy wishes?"

But Shaftan, whose eyes had not wavered for a single instant, knew in his heart that the Vizier was guilty, for of all those present he was the only one whose face showed no emotion at Pedaiah's astounding disclosure. As for Abiathar, into whose eyes a look of stern judgment on the King had crept for a moment, the relief at finding that his suspicions were unjust was so great, for his master's accents were charged with the truth, that he fell at his feet and wept and kissed the hem of his robe, making heartrending efforts, in spite of his cruel mutilation, to utter a few words of loyal devotion.

The King raised him up and bade him be seated at his side, and for a while there was a general discussion as to who could have sent the forged message. When Pedaiah's story was ended the general feeling was that Sennacherib had gladly seized upon this forged message as a pretext, for had he really desired to conclude peace with Judah he would at least have made some inquiry into the genuineness of the matter, in view of the protestations of the messengers, before committing the atrocious and cruel act of mutilating ambassadors of peace and slaying their suite. The King, too, felt in-

clined to regret bitterly the fact that seven days had already elapsed since the huge tribute demanded from him had started on its way to the Assyrian treasury at Nineveh. Doubts arose within his mind as to the wisdom of having submitted without a struggle to Assyria. He would send a message to the Holy Prophet Isaiah, his great Teacher, bidding him come to the Palace, and perchance he would be able to set all his doubts at rest by conveying to him the will of Jahveh, and advising him as to the best course to pursue. With regard to the immediate needs of the situation, however, the King wished to confer alone with his military leaders, and dismissed the two messengers with words of comfort and promises of compensation for the injuries they had suffered. He also bade the High Priest and the three Viziers retire.

"To you, O kinsman," said the King to Amon, "I have resolved to entrust the defence of Jerusalem. Tell me now how soon you think the Assyrians can come up against us, and by what roads you believe they will advance."

A glow of pride thrilled Amon at this mark of the King's confidence in him. The joy of battle raced through his blood once more and he felt almost glad at the turn events had taken.

"Thou shalt not have cause to regret thy choice, Lord," he answered, "for all my strength and all my cunning are thine to command! But let us hear Shaftan's opinion," continued the Prince, turning to the old warrior, "for he has greater knowledge of sieges than I."

"It seems to me, O King," said Shaftan, "that until Lachish has fallen Sennacherib will not move against thee. He has already detached a part of his army for

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the siege of Ekron, and other detachments have been left to garrison towns of whose loyalty he is not sure. On the other hand, even after Lachish falls he will have to leave some considerable force down in the Shephelah, for he knows not what the intentions of the Egyptians may be, and so long as they lie at Zalu they will be a menace to him. If Lachish falls, then he will take at least ten or twelve days to transport any considerable number of troops as far as Jerusalem, with the heavy siege-machines which he will need to even attempt to breach our walls. As for horsemen and chariots, he will keep them in the plains, where they will be more useful to him than they could be in the mountains, even if we possessed many horsemen and chariots here in Jerusalem, which we do not, as thou knowest, O King. It is now the twenty-third day of Tammuz, therefore, even if Lachish falls almost at once, it is not likely that we shall see the flash of their helmets in the Valley of Hinnom or on the Ephraim road until the middle of the month of Ab."

"That gives us nearly three weeks to complete our preparations for a siege, Lord," interposed Theokhares. "'Tis more than enough! I and my Carians will hold the Palace and the Temple. Yesterday only I inspected that part of the eastern wall which falls to us, from the Gate of the Guard on the north to the Upper Tower on the south, and I found it sound and strong. By Osogoa," exclaimed the Greek, slapping his chest, "unless the Assyrians can climb like wild-cats, their scaling-ladders will not avail them much against the eastern wall!"

"'Tis well, Theokhares," replied the King. "I know I can trust thee and thy brave warriors. But," and here the King turned anxiously to his uncle, "what

think you of these Arabs? Strange reports have reached me concerning their loyalty, O brother of my father!"

"Thou hast heard aright, nephew. There is disaffection among them. So yesterday I caused the Sheikhs of the B'ne-Tamirah, of the B'ne-Rushaida and of the Arabs from the eastern desert to be called together to the house of Joach the Recorder, and after much talking I made them agree to accept a small increase in their pay and rations in return for a ceasing of this treacherous talk that they will return to their tents. I think now they will prove loyal enough."

"And as for the B'ne-Jeruel, O King," interposed Amon, "thou knowest full well how their faithfulness has already been shown!" and a look of intelligence passed between the two men, for neither Theokhares nor Achimelek were as yet aware of the return of Nehushta to the Palace.

"Now the Assyrians will probably come by two routes to Jerusalem," continued the Prince, while the other three men listened attentively. "Sennacherib himself will come straight from Lachish by way of Mareshah and the Valley of Elah to Bethlehem, and as soon as Ekron falls its besiegers will come against us by way of the Valley of Ajalon and the two Beth-horons. On our side I have decided to distribute the soldiers for the defence of the city in the following manner. The Arabs whose loyalty is not very certain shall be posted on the eastern wall, which is almost impregnable, from the Upper Tower as far as the Fountain Gate, while Theokhares and his Carians, together with a few companies of *Gibborim*, will hold the Palace and the Temple. The B'ne-Jeruel shall fight along the southern wall from the Fountain Gate even

unto the Valley Gate, and they shall be helped by a thousand Hebrew soldiers. As for the remaining walls on the north and west, where the Assyrians are most likely to attack in force, they will be held by the remainder of the *Gibborim* and by our other Hebrew troops."

"And how many men altogether dost thou reckon then for the defence, Amon?" asked the King, an anxious look coming into his eyes.

"Full ten thousand, Lord. There are nearly six hundred of the Carians and three hundred *Gibborim* for the Temple and Palace, fifteen hundred Arabs for the rest of the eastern wall, five hundred of the B'ne-Jeruel for the southern wall, together with a thousand of our people and some six thousand five hundred soldiers to man the rest of the walls, made up out of the seven hundred *Gibborim* and between five and six thousand ordinary troops."

"And how many men think you the Assyrians will bring against Jerusalem?" asked the King once more. There were a few moments' silence while Amon, Achimelek and Shaftan looked at each other.

"Mayhap forty thousand, Lord," said Shaftan at last.

"Forty thousand against ten thousand!" murmured the King pensively. "Nay," he exclaimed, the light of faith shining brightly in his eyes, "I will not think of it thus; not forty thousand against ten thousand, but Ashur against Jahveh!"

Two days later Jerusalem had become a scene of the most tireless energy. There was no more talk of surrender but only of resistance to the death. Food from the surrounding districts was poured into the Holy City; stones, pitch, firebrands and arms were heaped up on every tower; the gates were strengthened

in every possible way, and everything was done to prepare for a siege that might last two or three years. The Holy Prophet Isaiah, indignant at the base treachery of the Assyrians, now counselled an absolute refusal of all further demands on their part and preached a Holy War. He stood on the steps of the vast Porch of Solomon, on the east of the Temple Court, and spoke to the assembled people.

“Listen to the words of Jahveh, O people of Judah !” His voice travelled across to the inner court, thronged with kneeling priests, and rang in the ears of the people in the outer court, rousing them to the highest frenzy of rage and anger against Assyria. “Woe to thee, O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger and the staff of my indignation ! Woe to thee that spoilest and thou wast not spoiled ; and dealest treacherously and they dealt not treacherously with thee ! When thou hast ceased to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled ; and when thou hast made an end to deal treacherously, they shall deal treacherously with thee ! Wherefore it shall come to pass that when I have performed my whole work upon Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the King of Assyria and the glory of his high looks ! I will send among his fat ones leanness, and under his glory there shall be kindled a burning like the burning of fire. And the light of Israel shall be for a fire and a flame, and it shall burn and devour him in one day !”

And just as he had fought for years against the influence of the war party and tried to avert the suicidal policy of rebellion against Assyria, so that night, in the King's House, did he counsel trust in Jahveh alone, and faith in the strength of the Holy One of Israel, for the Prophet's opinion concerning the help

that might be expected from Egypt, Egypt the "Sit-Still," Egypt that boasted and threatened and did nothing, had not changed. The King received him in a little summer-house built of latticed cedar-wood on the flat roof of the northern wing of the Palace, and overlooking the garden of Uzziah, the Upper City and the Temple Courts. This little retreat, where he often sat in the cool of the evening, was filled with rich divans, priceless carpets and costly furniture.

"May Jahveh grant thee peace, O my Father!" said the King as he rose to receive the Prophet, for Isaiah was not only the greatest Teacher and Prophet in all Judah, but he was also of the blood royal, his mother having been Huldah, Princess of the B'ne-David and daughter of King Amaziah.

"And may the Holy One of Israel protect thee, O King!" replied the Prophet. The two men discoursed of many things concerning Judah and Assyria, and as the Prophet was on the point of taking his leave they stood awhile at the edge of the roof-parapet and gazed sadly and solemnly at the Holy City lying before them in the stillness of the starlit night. They bowed reverently as they faced towards the huge mass of the Temple, and suddenly Isaiah spoke a few words of comfort to the King, and by the altered tone of his voice the monarch knew that the Spirit of Jahveh was come upon Isaiah the Prophet. And the King fell upon his knees and listened with bowed head.

"Fear not, O Hezekiah," said the Prophet, "for the Lord of Hosts hath sworn, saying, 'Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand: that I will break the Assyrian in my land and upon my mountains tread him under foot, so that his yoke shall depart from

off thee and his burden depart from off thy shoulder ! ' ”

And a great peace descended upon the King's soul and his faith was made strong within him because of the words of Isaiah the Prophet.

CHAPTER XII

AND now there began for the Holy City a time of fear and anticipation, of despair and hope, and always and ever of unceasing military preparation, in the midst of which all else was forgotten. The New Moon of Ab brought no gladness in its train and no messengers were dispatched, according to the old custom, to bring the joyful tidings to the cities of Judah, for most of them had been laid waste by Assyria. Neither had any warning blaze been lit on the summit of the Mount of Olives, for there was burning enough throughout the land. Amon had sent out a number of spies and scouts, some Hebrew and some chosen from among the most trustworthy of the B'ne-Jeruel. Their duty was to roam far and wide over the countryside, in any and every disguise, and to report as to the actual and probable movements of the Assyrians. The first important news they brought was that of the fall of Lachish, which had succumbed to a daring night assault with scaling ladders on the least protected side of the town. Two Hebrew spies were able to assist at Sennacherib's triumph before the gates of the city, and to report its details to Amon in Jerusalem the very next day.

The Prince's thousand and one military duties left him very little time for himself, but now that his love for Nehushta was known to the King and Queen

and countenanced by them it was easy for him to see her. Every precaution, however, was observed to prevent the knowledge of the Princess's return from spreading abroad. She continued to wear her Bedawi disguise and passed her days in strict seclusion in the innermost apartments of the Queen-Mother, seen only by one or two faithful attendants of the old Queen. And if they had any suspicions as to the identity of the new tirewoman who slept in their mistress's bedchamber, and scarcely ever left her side, they were careful to conceal them.

It was only at night, therefore, that the Princess, accompanied by one of the Bedawi women and closely veiled, ventured to slip out of the Royal apartments into the Palace gardens where she could spend a few precious and happy moments with Amon. On these occasions she seemed obsessed by strange fears and anxieties. Her young soul had not yet fully recovered from the strain it had undergone when for a time she was faced with the horror of exile and degradation, and she lived in daily terror lest Sennacherib should discover the deception that had been practised upon him and should insist upon obtaining possession of her.

She had, of course, heard of the cruel massacre and mutilation of the messengers and their suite, and Amon had also told her of the suspicions which he and Shaftan entertained concerning Shebna and Bela. The Edomite had returned to Jerusalem within a day or two of the return of the messengers and, by Amon's orders, he had been promptly seized in his own house and brought before the Grand Vizier Eliakim. But it was impossible to sustain any definite accusation against him. He had many friends in the palace and

in Jerusalem, and he easily proved that he had left the city the day before the messengers, taking with him two pack-asses laden with goods, to dispose of which in the ordinary way of business he stated to be the only motive of his visit to the Assyrian camp. As for his dealings with Shebna and the episode of Zibiah, by Shaftan's advice, it was thought better not to press the matter at the time, but to keep a strict watch on his movements without awaking his suspicions too far.

When, however, Amon casually repeated one night to Nehushta the incident of the whipping of Bela at the Ephraim Gate, and the cripple's consequent hatred of him, her woman's instinct was instantly roused and a new terror added to her life, for she felt that the Edomite would never rest until he had revenged himself for the humiliation inflicted upon him.

"I beg of thee, beloved," implored the Princess, "to have great care, for this man will do thee a mischief if thou but givest him the occasion for it!" But Amon laughed at the Princess's fears.

"Why, sweet one, think you I fear this miserable cripple? I could crush him as one crushes a noisome insect!"

"True, Amon, but forget not that the sting of some insects brings death! Promise me that thou wilt be careful, O love of my life!"

Naturally Amon promised, although he could not possibly imagine in what way the cripple might injure him. He was much intrigued however when, two days later, one of his spies reported that Bela had visited the old Queen Orpah on three occasions, ostensibly to display some new fabrics which she was constantly allowed to buy for the adornment of the

dressed-up image, which, in her insanity, she treated as if it were indeed a living child. Like every one else the Prince knew the history of the broken wife of King Ahaz and of the terrible episode that had driven her mad. He had never seen her, however, although once or twice he had caught glimpses of a haggard and grief-stricken face at one of the latticed windows of the House of Pharaoh's Daughter, and he imagined it to be that of the old Queen. In pursuance of his plan to keep a watch on Bela's movements he caused a strict guard to be kept day and night at all the gates of Queen Orpah's house, but with no result, for after those three visits Bela never again went near her.

Had Amon, however, been able to see into the future, he would not have hesitated an instant before putting an end for ever to the malignant activities of Bela, for the Edomite spent his time scattering the seeds of treachery and rebellion on the most favourable soil. He mixed continually with many of the Arab mercenaries, occasionally made inexpensive presents to their Sheikhs, and did not miss an opportunity of dropping poisonous words, hints and allusions into their willing ears. He would hypocritically pretend that he felt much concern for the coming plight of Jerusalem, and extol the wondrous organization and efficiency of the Assyrian armies. He would paint in glowing colours the delights of life in Assyria, which he had once visited, and the generosity of the Assyrians to those who readily submitted to them, and yet, in every case, so great was his cunning, that even if his words had been overheard it would have been difficult to accuse him of downright treachery, or even of disloyalty. The result of this insidious campaign was to give rise again among the Arab mercenaries to that discontent

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which had been almost entirely allayed by the King's uncle, a discontent which grew day by day as the reports of the rapid approach of the Assyrians were confirmed.

As for the Queen Orpah, the Edomite had not been mistaken as regards her mental condition. She had partly recovered many years before from the insanity that had come upon her when she lost her child, but she had recognized that her life hung upon a thread and she had continued to feign a madness which served both to protect her and to keep alive the deep-rooted hatred that she felt for every one of the B'ne-David. She would have endured nameless sufferings to make sure that death, torture and dishonour would come to the Queen-Mother, Abi, the hated rival whom she had never seen and who had taken her place in the affections of King Ahaz ; and her hatred for the King, her son, was, if anything, even greater. In fact it could be said that the intensity of this hatred, and the undying hope that some day she would be able to satisfy it, had helped to keep the flame of life burning within her withered bosom. With her Bela had gone more boldly about his treacherous business. Choosing a moment when they were left alone, he had spoken as clearly as he had dared.

"Judah is like to be wasted now, as were Moab and Edom, O Queen ! The Assyrians are almost at the gates and they bring not good fortune for the B'ne-David !"

"Would that I could help the wasting and the burning and the bringing of misfortune to them," replied the Queen, with a sombre glitter in her eyes, "but I am old and spent !" She seemed to recollect herself suddenly. "But what care I for the B'ne-David !" she continued in a horribly cracked voice,

while she crooned over the doll and dandled it in her arms. "Have I not got thee, O little son?"

The Edomite looked around cautiously and ignoring her change of attitude, lowered his voice: "And yet, O Queen, if thy soul thirsteth for vengeance against the B'ne-David, it may be within reach of thy hand soon!"

"What meanest thou, O Edomite?" asked Orpah. She leaned forward over the doll, a sudden flame of hope in her eyes.

"The Assyrians are mighty men and men of cunning, O Queen! Perchance ere the moon is new again they will be within the gates of Jerusalem. Perchance they will come even unto the Palace!" Bela paused an instant and lowered his voice still more. "How easily couldst thou cause gates to be opened at the right time! How easily mightest thou lead them into the King's apartments!" A violent agitation shook the old Queen's wasted body.

"O Chemosh! Great God of my fathers!" she muttered, "grant me strength to see that day! If the Assyrians come," she continued, "I shall be ready if thou wilt but come again and tell me what I shall do. But why hatest thou the B'ne-David?" she asked, turning fiercely and with sudden suspicion on Bela.

The Edomite's face changed instantly. His cunning expression became transformed. He seemed literally to bristle with hatred and snarling rage, like some wild beast. His face went chalky-white, his lips were drawn back and he hissed his words rather than spoke them.

"One of them, the Prince Amon—may he lie unburied!—had me beaten by his slaves, O Queen—beaten before the eyes of the woman I loved; and he

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laughed when I screamed out in pain, and she laughed too and fled from me! May Baal Milcom curse them both! May He make him suffer as I am making her suffer now!"

And then the old woman who attended on the Queen shambled into the room, and Orpah fell to babbling over her doll, while Bela rolled and unrolled his silken fabrics and praised their many beauties.

On his second and third visits Bela, feeling quite certain of her help, gave her an outline of the plan to deliver the city to the Assyrians and of his own scheme to do away with Amon. He explained to her how she could help by pointing out quickly the King's apartments to the Assyrian soldiers, who would probably rush the Palace, and by inciting them to kill him. For Shebna feared that if the King were taken alive or gave himself up Sennacherib, in spite of all his promises, might spare his life, or even retain him on the throne as an obedient vassal. The Vizier did not have much faith in Assyrian promises. But if the King were killed in the general mêlée, as he had no sons and no brothers, it would be easier to set up a new dynasty without exciting too much discontent among the Hebrews. And so Bela was well content with his work, the results of which he duly reported to Shebna. And on the sixth day of Ab, after he had visited the Queen Orpah for the third time he returned to his house and went in to Zibiah.

Ever since he had regained possession of the luckless girl he had kept her a prisoner, and for a jailer he had given her the old hag Meshullemeth, his mother. He always had four or five young female slaves in his harem, which was situated, as usual, over the inner court, and not wishing to let Zibiah mingle with the

other women he kept her securely locked up in two small rooms built partly over the gateway. In the one there was a small latticed window overlooking the narrow street outside, and in the other a somewhat larger window overlooking the court of the house. The two rooms were entirely shut off from the rest of the building, being reached by a narrow winding stairway between the passage that led from the street to the court and the inner room. In these two rooms the wretched Zibiah led a miserable existence of mental and physical torture, for the old hag seemed to have taken a special aversion to her and did not scruple to pinch and beat her at every opportunity. As for Bela, whenever he visited her he spent more than half the time abusing and cursing her because of what he considered her ingratitude in escaping from him.

The life-story of the young *Kedeshah* was a sad one : perhaps even sadder than that of Neziach, the *Kedeshah* who had taken Nehushta's place. She was barely sixteen years old, and her father had been a Tyrian sailor. She had been born of his facile loves with a beautiful Greek devotee in the Temple of Ash-toreth of Sidon. Inheriting her mother's great beauty the girl had been dedicated to the Goddess as soon as she reached the prescribed age. And there, in the Temple, Bela, who had come to Sidon to buy slaves, had seen her, taken a violent fancy to her and bought her from the priests. At first, in spite of the Edomite's repulsive ugliness, the young girl had felt grateful to him for redeeming her from what she vaguely felt to be a life of shame, but soon her master developed an inordinate jealousy which caused him to take her about with him in all his wanderings. And thus began a life of wretchedness and torture for the poor girl.

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If her glances happened to fall on any man, however casually and innocently, Bela would become like a wild beast and would beat her unmercifully. Soon she grew to hate and fear him, and that day at the Gate of Ephraim when her half-unconscious smile at the Prince caused the Edomite to strike her brutally, thus bringing swift punishment upon himself, she had eagerly seized the opportunity offered to her and fled, only to be brought back, as has been seen, and treated worse than ever. Many times since Zibiah had felt the inclination to put an end to her miserable life, but each time the hope of escaping sooner or later from her cruel master had proved too strong.

She lay now on a divan, her body half supported on her elbow and her head resting on her hand. The heat was suffocating and the room was in semi-obscurity, for very little light penetrated through the small latticed window high up in the wall, in spite of the blazing noonday sun outside. On a mat near her lay a coarse earthenware dish with some scraps of food and a clay jar filled with water. Her eyes were closed, and were it not for the gentle heaving of her breast her beautiful face, with its wide brow, straight nose and delicately chiselled lips, might have been taken for those of a statue. The sound of steps coming up the crazy stairway roused her to sudden life. She rose quickly, took one or two steps forward and then sat down again on a corner of the divan. Into her face there crept an expression of fear, which changed into one of sullen hardness as the curtain over the doorway was drawn aside and Bela stood on the threshold. She left him greeting unanswered, and he came over to her with a darkening scowl on his features. Instinctively she raised her arm as if to ward off a blow, but no blow came.

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"Thou evil daughter of sin," said the Edomite, "almost I could find it in my heart to kill thee now for thy sullenness !"

"Kill me then and be done with it !" cried Zibiah defiantly.

"No, no ; I will not kill thee yet awhile !" he muttered slowly and with a judicious air as if he were meditating some still more terrible punishment. "Thou hast made me suffer and thou shalt suffer also ! Never again so long as thou livest shalt thou be free to gaze upon any man, O Zibiah ! Ah," he screamed, seized with a sudden fury, "thou didst laugh to see me humiliated ! Thou didst laugh because my limbs are misshapen and those of him who brought me to shame are straight and strong !" Gradually, as his feelings began to get beyond his control, his voice rose until it sounded like a thin, half-strangled shriek. Zibiah began to tremble for fear of his violence and would have fled into the inner room, but Bela seized her roughly by the shoulders, tearing her garments and forcing her to listen to him. "I said thou shouldst never gaze upon another man, but I meant it not. Thou shalt see him once more. Thou shalt see him who mocked me and bade thee fly from me !" In his rage he threw all prudence to the winds and began to babble details of the plot to kill the Prince. "Thou shalt see his dead face, thou daughter of a harlot ! The Assyrians shall kill him ! Into this very house shall I lead him, and here shall he taste of death !" He threw her violently from him so that she fell on the ground, where he left her sobbing and bruised.

Ever since the day when the Prince Amon had interfered to protect her from Bela's brutality and bade her escape Zibiah had cherished his image within

her heart. In all the strength of his splendid manhood he had seemed to her like the youthful god Adoni, the beloved of Baalat-Ashtoreth, the Lady Ashtoreth. And now a sick fear filled her soul because of the threatening words of the Edomite, for although she had not been able to grasp all that he said she felt that they portended some great danger to the Prince. A wild longing came upon her to fly to him, to warn him. And then she realized with bitter anguish how utterly helpless she was. She was a prisoner, watched day and night by an old hag who tortured her; forced to suffer the blows and abuse of the deformed monster who held her in his power, or to endure his still more repulsive caresses.

The Prince Amon, whose name she had learnt from the priests of the Temple of Ashtoreth where she had taken refuge, was as far from her as her own beautiful Sidon. She could do nothing but weep and pray to Baalat-Ashtoreth, the only divine power who seemed friendly and kindly, and the only one whom she had been taught to worship by the sacrifice of her young body. But she would not abandon all hope. There were not many slaves in the house and perhaps an opportunity would come for her to escape. She was young and strong, and she felt herself capable of strangling the old hag Meshullemeth, if she proved to be the only obstacle to her flight towards freedom.

She arose from the ground, dried her tears, and lay on the couch again, and soon merciful slumber descended upon her weary soul, and Zibiah the *Kedeshah* knew happiness in her dreams, for in them Amon came to her and smiled kindly upon her, so that she was comforted.

CHAPTER XIII

THE fall of Lachish created an immense relief in the heart of the Great King. With the exception of three towns farther north, Ekron, Timnath and Libnah, all of which were encircled and closely besieged by his troops, the road to Egypt lay open at last, for he did not doubt for an instant that he would be able to beat in the open field the half-organized forces that lay at Zalu waiting for events.

The four years that had elapsed since Sennacherib's accession to the throne had not in any way subdued his restless disposition, and the relative inactivity enforced on him by the slow and complicated siege-operations which had been required to reduce Lachish had been as gall and wormwood to his soul. Spoilt by years of successful campaigning from the gigantic snow-peaks of Urartu to the tropical and deadly marshes of Chaldæa, he felt like a man who had successfully fought his way through a forest full of lions, only to be assailed and balked by a pack of unclean dogs.

He had filled up his time before Lachish with furious rushes up into the hills and from one camp to another, followed by his faithful bodyguard, and everywhere advising and criticizing. His energy was volcanic, and his presence seemed to impart new vigour and courage to his troops. He reviewed them and encouraged them; he altered details in the construction of the siege-machines; he tried new ways of mining the gates of Lachish and Ekron; he distributed rewards

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to those soldiers and officers who had distinguished themselves in the various attacks ; he punished mercilessly those who had made the smallest mistakes ; he kept up through his secretaries a voluminous correspondence with the Queen Nakia, who had been left as Regent in Nineveh, and almost every day, together with the two Tartans, Ashur-killani and Nabuna'id, he worked out some new plan for a strategic advance on Egypt.

The capture of Lachish was marked by the usual scenes of massacre and torture. The Hebrew Governor was flayed alive, and his sons were forced to take part in the procession of captives that passed before Sennacherib's throne outside the gates of the city. Their lips or noses were pierced and through the holes rings and cords were passed by which the Assyrian soldiers led them like animals, while the eldest was made to carry the decapitated head of his father suspended round his neck. That same evening the details of an expedition to Jerusalem were fixed in the royal tent.

"These treacherous Hebrew dogs must be taught a final lesson !" exclaimed the Great King to the two Tartans. "They thought to appease me by gifts of money while they betrayed my Majesty to the Egyptians, but Nebo revealed their treason to me ! I have been too patient with all these petty chiefs in the west, and by Ishtar of Arbela, I swear I will put an end to Hebrew rule in Jerusalem as my father put an end to it in Samaria ! Ashur alone shall reign from Elam to Ethiopia !"

Nabu-na'id, however, the Tartan of the Left, pleaded for a little diplomacy first, but diplomacy backed by a sufficiently imposing show of force.

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Before committing themselves to the regular siege of such an enormously strong place as Jerusalem he was of opinion that an attempt should be made to obtain the capitulation of the fortress by other means, for there were rumours of great internal dissensions in the Hebrew capital.

"Wherefore should we waste much time and lose many men to take this city, O Great King?" he asked. "Let the King of Kings detach some twenty thousand men from here, while the rest of the army proceeds north to Libnah and Ekron. Let the siege-machines from here be sent partly to Libnah and partly to Ekron. Then let ten thousand more men with a little cavalry and all the heaviest siege-machines go from Ekron to Jerusalem by the easy north road. Let the King of the World send Bel-natsir from Ekron, and I myself will lead the troops from here. Perchance Hezekiah's soldiers will fear the horrors of a long siege sufficiently to force their master to yield! Thou knowest, O King, what a persuasive tongue Bel-natsir has!" and the Tartan smiled significantly.

"By Nergal!" cried the King, "thou hast ever a headpiece on thy shoulders, my brave Nabu-na'id! We will do even as thou sayest; shut this Hezekiah up in his royal city like a bird in a cage, and if he will not yield," and the King's face became dark with anger, "though my chariots swim in blood like river-gods I will not turn my face towards Nineveh again until the holy standards of Ashur rise on the ruins of Jerusalem!"

And so it came about that on the thirteenth of Ab Amon's scouts reported that twenty thousand Assyrians, mostly infantry, with a little cavalry and twelve heavy siege-machines, were advancing from the

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north along the main road that ran east of Eleph. At the same time from the south another Assyrian army, at least twenty thousand strong, occupied Gallim and Bethlehem, and prepared to encamp on the edge of the plain of Rephaim and on the heights around Jerusalem.

The excitement in the city became intense. The housetops were crowded all day long with people eager to be the first to catch the flash of the Assyrian helmets. The guard at all the gates was trebled and all private sacrifices in the Temple were stopped, for a siege, with all its attendant horrors of famine and disease, might last two or three years, and every lamb and every kid, every handful of flour and every drop of oil suddenly became more precious than gold.

Since it was now certain that the Assyrians would besiege the city and that only a miracle could save Judah from complete ruin, Shebna, strongly supported by the two Egyptian envoys, again openly proclaimed his belief that the Egyptians, in spite of all their procrastination, would move forward and attack the Assyrians at the right moment. The Vizier, however, continued to deny stoutly any knowledge of the mysterious message, purporting to come from the King of Judah, which was intercepted by the Assyrians. He even regained some of his lost popularity, though nothing would convince Shafan of his straightforwardness or make him believe that there was not some secret understanding between him and Bela. Amon, too, had always felt an intense dislike of the Syrian's intriguing methods and of his arrogance when he held the post of Grand Vizier. For that reason he felt inclined to share Shafan's opinion, and did not allow the vigilance of the spies whom he kept on the track of the two men to relax for an instant.

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The Prince even went so far as to speak to the King concerning the advisability of having Shebna removed from office altogether, until the Assyrians should have departed from Judah. But, as has been said, the Vizier had many powerful friends, and now that he had attained to a certain degree of popularity again, the King feared some outburst on the part of the fickle populace of Jerusalem, an outburst which he dared not face under the circumstances. Therefore when, three days later, two unarmed Assyrian eunuchs presented themselves at the Valley Gate and announced that the *Rab-shakeh* Bel-natsir was desirous of meeting and conferring with representatives of the King before initiating the siege, it was decided to send Shebna as well as the Grand Vizier Eliakim and Joach, the King's Secretary, to meet the Assyrian general. The two eunuchs were taken to the house of the Grand Vizier and it was arranged that the meeting should take place on the morning of the following day in the wide space lying just outside the Fountain Gate.

It should be explained that between the southern wall of Jerusalem and the eastern wall there was a wall of some four hundred feet in length which ran due north-east and entirely blocked the mouth of the little valley separating Mount Ophel from the Upper City on Mount Zion. At the southern end of this short wall there were two gates: a small one almost at the angle itself known as the "Gate between two Walls," and one a little further west, the Dung Gate. At the northern end lay the Fountain Gate, so named because of its proximity to the Pool or Fountain of Siloam, from which a narrow street ran down to the gate itself.

The news of the meeting soon spread throughout the

city and the careless and light-hearted population, most of whom did not for a moment realize the magnitude of the dangers that threatened them, and imagined that the walls of the Holy City rendered it impregnable, renewed their orgies in every street and bazaar. Jerusalem was like a riotous city, full of tumults and shoutings. The housetops were crowded all night, and at early dawn the whole of that part of the wall which commanded a view of the appointed meeting-place, that is the whole wall from the Dung Gate to the Fountain Gate, was covered with a turbulent and excited multitude, equally ready to yell insults or throw stones at the Assyrians. And from every tower along the circumference of the enceinte could be seen the brown tents of the Assyrians and the flash of the sun's rays on the glittering helmets and spear-heads of their galloping horsemen, while to the north the twelve siege-machines with their high towers hung with shields and their leathern coverings, reared their monstrous and ungainly bulk against the sky.

The three Viziers were only accompanied by two or three court officials and a couple of scribes, but the *Rab-shakeh* arrived at the place of meeting in a gorgeous chariot, followed by a brilliant retinue of mounted officers and half a dozen secretaries and eunuchs, and escorted by a hundred picked lancers, who drew rein at a distance of some two hundred feet.

No better man than Bel-natsir could have been chosen as an emissary by the Great King to attempt to carry out once more his favourite policy of seducing the subjects of a hostile Prince from their allegiance. The *Rab-shakeh* spoke Hebrew and Aramaic fluently, besides three or four other languages, and had even a smattering of Egyptian. He had made a deep study

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of the internal politics of the principal states of the West, and had often had cause to marvel at the reasons prompting the confidence shown by this petty and decadent mountain kingdom of Judah. He knew the weak points of its policy, however, as well as the Prophet Isaiah himself, and his first words, after the usual ceremonious greetings, went straight for the sorest of them.

“What is this confidence of yours, my Lords, which impels you to rebel against the Great King, the King of Assyria?” The *Rab-shakeh* spoke in very good Hebrew, but he spoke it, if the comparison be permitted, as a German might speak Flemish.

“If we are confident, my Lord *Rab-shakeh*, it is because we counted upon the help of the allies who have so basely deserted us!” answered Eliakim.

The General smiled pityingly.

“You think then, my Lords, that mere promises give you strength enough to defy my master, the Great King? And what promises!” he exclaimed, his eyes suddenly filling with scorn. “The promises of the Egyptians in whom you have been trusting these many years and with whom your master has been carrying on a treasonable correspondence in spite of his protestations of submission to the Great King!” The *Rab-shakeh*’s voice had become full of anger and his brow darkened.

“Nay, I pray thee, Lord,” interposed Joach, “as Jahveh liveth, we swear to thee that the King our Lord has not betrayed his word which he swore to the Great King. He writeth no letters except by my hand and we know naught of any treasonable correspondence!”

The *Rab-shakeh* waved his hand disdainfully, as if the matter were beyond dispute; as if it were not

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worth his while to disprove the clumsy lies of these poor and deluded officials.

“I know that Hezekiah has trusted and still trusts these Egyptians; and you see, my Lords, how much their help is worth! A rabble of petty chiefs who try to ape the long-past days of Mizraim’s glory by calling themselves ‘The Pharaoh of This’ and ‘The Pharaoh of That.’ And all they do is to lie at Zalu like a pack of terrified dogs! Afraid to go forward because they dare not face the might of Assyria, and afraid to go back because they tremble before the wrath of the real master of Egypt, the black man who sits on the throne of Ethiopia and makes use of these petty puppets to defend the borders of the kingdom he has wrested from their weak hands! I tell you, my Lords,” continued the *Rab-shakeh*, speaking always more loudly and confidently, “that he who trusts in Egypt is like a man who leaneth on a bruised reed. If he lean hard on it, lo! it will go into his hand and pierce it, and so will Egypt do to all who trust in her!”

The Hebrews had winced at the contemptuous and disrespectful tone in which the Assyrian, trampling on all accepted etiquette, had spoken of the King of Judah as “Hezekiah.” In fact all through his discourse there ran the same insistent strain. “A petty mountain chief, ‘Hezekiah,’ daring to pit his puny strength against that of the Great King, the King of Assyria, the Conqueror of the World!”

“There is some one in whom we trust besides Egypt, my Lord *Rab-shakeh*,” retorted Eliakim, his eyes flashing with wounded pride and resentment. “We trust also in Jahveh, our God, who hath protected our Kings and our Holy City for many centuries!”

“You trust in Jahveh, your God?” said Bel-natsir

slowly and in an inquiring tone. "Is not Jahveh the God whose ancient altars and shrines Hezekiah has destroyed throughout the land, seeking to make His people worship Him only before the altar in the Temple of Jerusalem? It seems to me, O Hebrews, that Hezekiah shows his trust in a strange manner! And besides," continued the Assyrian, as if he were returning to the really important point, "if you trust in your God, how is it that He is not able to repay your trust by giving you the means to defend yourselves? The way in which Ashur, our God, repays the trust which we Assyrians place in Him can be seen of all men!" and the *Rab-shakeh* pointed proudly to the numberless tents spreading all around, and then to the splendid body of cavalry who stood immovable and in perfect formation behind him. They seemed like some great living mass wrought of bronze, weapons and glittering cuirasses, magnificent horses and great helmeted riders, all waiting but a single word from their master to wake into intense life and sweep down like some resistless avalanche.

"Listen now, my Lords! My Master the King of Assyria will make you a gift of two thousand horses like these if Hezekiah, for his part, is able to set riders upon them!"

A great, boisterous laugh burst from the throats of all the Assyrian officers, while the distant steeds, as if they heard and approved the words of the *Rab-shakeh*, arched their necks with conscious pride, pawed the ground and tossed their flowing manes.

"How then can you hope," went on the General, "to turn away the face of the least of my master's servants, seeing you put your trust in Egypt for chariots and horsemen?"

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The Hebrews remained silent and embarrassed. They were growing more and more conscious of the agitation among the mass of people who stood on the walls behind them and who were able to hear almost every word of the *Rab-shakeh's* loud and confident voice. And having shaken their religious confidence and made a mockery of their military strength Bel-natsir now proceeded to launch his most pointed and daring diplomatic shaft.

"Think you, my Lords," he said, speaking slowly and deliberately, "that Assyria has neglected to propitiate even the smallest and least powerful of the Gods of the countries against which she wages war? Think you that we have come up against Judah without the help and protection of Jahveh?" He waited for an instant as if to let the words he was about to utter have their full effect. "I tell you that Jahveh Himself spoke to my master, the Great King, the King of Assyria, and said to him: 'Go up against this land and destroy it, for the people thereof have offended Me by destroying My shrines.'"

The murmurs and protestations of the crowd on the wall became louder and more insistent, and at last Eliakim, alone of the three Viziers, ventured to remonstrate firmly but courteously with the *Rab-shakeh*. The King's Secretary, Joach, had held his peace since his one remark, and as for Shebna, he had throughout acted the part of a listener, and his expression remained impenetrable.

"We pray thee, my Lord, to cease speaking in Hebrew, for thy words cause a disturbance among the people on the wall. Speak rather to us in Aramaic, if it please thee, for we understand it."

Instantly the *Rab-shakeh* saw his opportunity and

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seized it. "Has my master sent me to your master or to you that I should speak these words for your ears only?" he asked with brutal insolence. "Have I not rather been sent here to speak to those men on the wall who, when once I draw my ramparts around this city, will be forced to eat and drink their own excrements? My Lords, you mistake my purpose strangely if that be your thought."

The Assyrian had carried on the whole of his discourse while standing in his chariot and looking down disdainfully on the three Viziers who stood around it. He now sprang suddenly to the ground, his great sword clanking against his heels, and waved the Hebrews aside roughly and contemptuously. He took a few steps forward and addressed himself in his loudest and firmest tones to the people gathered on the wall. A hush fell upon them as if some great hand had suddenly been laid upon all their lips.

"Listen to the word of the Great King, the King of Assyria, O men of Jerusalem! Let not Hezekiah deceive you, for he is not able to do anything for you. If he say unto you, 'Jahveh will surely deliver us from the King of Assyria,' believe him not, O Hebrews! Hearken unto my words, for I bring you a message of peace and goodwill from my master if you will but yield! Surrender to me now and every one of you shall eat of his own vine and of his own fig-tree until the Great King takes you away to a land like your own, a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of oil and honey! Surrender now and ye shall live! Resist me and ye shall surely die! Hearken not to Hezekiah if he tell you that Jahveh will deliver you!" The iron hand began to appear underneath the velvet glove and the *Rab-shakeh* threw all con-

sistency to the winds as his anger rose. "Has any God ever delivered his land out of the hand of the King of Assyria? Where are the Gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the Gods of Sepharvaim, of Henna and Ivvah? They are at Nineveh, at Ashur and at Kalah, in Assyrian shrines, O men of Judah! Where are the Gods of the land of Samaria? Did they not also worship Jahveh in Samaria and did He avail them to save Samaria out of the Great King's hand? Who are they among all the Gods of the countries that have delivered their land out of the Great King's hand that Jahveh should deliver Jerusalem out of his hand? Is Jahveh greater than the other Gods? Answer me, O men whom Hezekiah hath deceived!"

The crowd was silent, but had there been any heart left in them they might have pointed out to the Assyrian the inconsistency between his claim to have been sent by Jahveh and the scorn he was now pouring on their God. Bel-natsir, however, did not wait for an answer but turned angrily on his heels. He was doubly angry. He was angry because of the apparent failure of his eloquence to move the Hebrews and angry with himself for having allowed his rage to get the better of his diplomacy. He sprang into his chariot and spoke a few abrupt words to the silent Viziers.

"Let an answer be sent to me before noon to-morrow, for after that my orders are to begin the siege of this rebellious city, and to continue it until not one stone stands upon another!"

Seizing the reins himself, the *Rab-shakeh* drove off at full gallop towards the camp on the opposite heights, followed by his officers and by the troop of lancers, which wheeled with magnificent precision.

The Viziers returned to the Fountain Gate where

they were met by Amon, who, with a few of the *Gibborim*, had stood among the people on the wall and listened with indignation to the insolent and brutal words of the Assyrian general. Although Shebna had been silent throughout, he now bewailed more loudly than either of the two other Viziers, and on his way to the Palace he was the first to tear his cloak as a sign of grief and mourning, an example which was followed by Eliakim and Joach.

The King listened in silence while Eliakim repeated the words of the *Rab-shakeh*, and when he heard how the Assyrian had reproached Jahveh, the living God, he gave a great cry, rent his garments and removed his headdress. And when the Vizier had finished speaking he charged them to wait upon the Holy Prophet Isaiah at his house to beseech for intercession and advice. As for the King himself, he put on a cloak of sackcloth over his torn robes and went up into the Temple and prayed on his knees between the two Holy Pillars, Jachin and Boaz, until the setting of the sun, when he returned to the Palace that he might know the message of Isaiah the Prophet.

Followed by a panic-stricken multitude the three Viziers made their way through the crowded streets to the house of the Holy Prophet. At every corner little groups discussed the offers of the Assyrians, and though a few were in favour of fighting to the last man rather than allowing the dreaded troops of Sennacherib to enter the Holy City the great majority were for yielding.

As if supernaturally warned of the impending visit, the Holy Prophet was standing in the gateway of his house surrounded by his sons and disciples, and the influence of his inspired personality seemed immediately

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to communicate itself to the seething mob that surged around the Viziers. To every man, woman and child in that fear-stricken crowd there came the sudden conviction that upon the frail thread of the Holy Prophet's first words hung the fate of David's Throne, of the Holy City and of Judah. Nay, the vindication of the very existence and power of Jahveh Himself! and the frail thread proved to be a rope of many strands, for the Prophet's soul was calm, resolute and trustful in that great moment and his words made boundless faith the portion of all.

As it was an hour of bitter shame for the Vizier Shebna when he saw himself forced to wait upon the Holy Prophet and to ask for his advice, so was it an hour of triumph and vindication for Isaiah, who for years had exerted all his influence to avert the suicidal policy of rebellion against Assyria. His counsels had been set at naught by the war-party who placed their trust in the promises of Egypt, and now, in the hour of defeat and humiliation, his bitterest opponent was forced to come, clad in sackcloth, to beg for the advice which he had scornfully rejected for so long.

The three Viziers bowed deeply before the Prophet, over whose features there passed a bitter smile as his eyes rested on Shebna.

"Peace be upon thee, O Holy Prophet!" said Eliakim. "We come with a message from the King our Lord, for his heart is sorely stricken because of the words of the *Rab-shakeh* whom his master, the King of Assyria, sent to reproach the living God. And the King bade us ask thee, O Holy Prophet, whether perchance Jahveh, the God to whom thou standest nearer than other men, hath heard the words of the *Rab-shakeh* and will rebuke them!"

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The Prophet's face wore an expression of sombre gloom, and it was some time before he answered the Vizier. But when he began to speak, his gloomy expression gradually changed to one of radiant faith and inspiration.

"And peace be upon thee and upon thine house, O Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah! Say to thy master that Jahveh hath already spoken to me, The Holy One of Israel, blessed be He! hath already made known His purpose to me." The Prophet's eyes closed, as the Divine Breath entered into his soul and he seemed to tower above all those who stood around him. "Repeat to thy master the words of Jahveh who speaketh thus: 'Be not afraid, O Son of David, of the words that thou hast heard wherewith the servants of the King of Assyria have sought to reproach Me, and to make thy heart faint. Be not afraid of the Assyrian: though he smite My people with the rod and lift up his staff against them after the manner of Egypt. For yet a very little while and mine anger shall accomplish their destruction. For I, even I, Jahveh of Hosts, shall stir up against him a scourge as in the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb.'"

Next morning at dawn messengers were dispatched to the Assyrian camp bearing a message from the Grand Vizier Eliakim to the *Rab-shakeh*:

"Eliakim-ben-Hilkiah, Servant of Hezekiah, King of Judah, to the *Rab-shakeh* Bel-natsir, Servant of the Great King, greeting! Behold, there is war between thy master and my master; neither shall any of thy soldiers set foot on the threshold of any of the gates of this city."

CHAPTER XIV

SINCE the night when Amon had spoken to her of the Edomite's hatred and of his threats, Nehushta had been a prey to a great restlessness. She felt oppressed by strange fears and anxieties which she could not explain even to herself, and at night she would either lie sleepless for many hours, starting at every sound, or else she would awake trembling from dreams of horror in which it seemed to her that an invisible net was being gradually drawn round her, a net out of which she could not escape as she had escaped once from the foul destiny to which the King of Assyria would have condemned her. She tried in vain to comfort herself with the thought that Amon's ruse had been entirely successful and that the Assyrians would never succeed in capturing Jerusalem, but it was only during the few moments which the Prince contrived to snatch by her side that she was able to throw off the suffocating terrors that were darkening her life.

After the arrival of the Assyrian besieging troops, Amon's visits became shorter, because of his manifold duties, and they met either in the apartments of the Queen-Mother herself or else in the Palace gardens, where Nehushta would sometimes go in the cool of the evening accompanied by a woman of the B'ne-Jeruel who had become greatly attached to her. When they

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met in the gardens, every sound of bird or insect in the bushes caused her to start in sudden terror, and often she fancied she saw elusive shapes gliding about among the trees. Once, too, the Prince had heard a sudden creaking of branches in a thicket in front of which he and Nehushta were standing, and plunging abruptly into the low bushes in the darkness, he fancied he saw a crouching shape make off with a series of bounds. He pursued it for some little distance, but fearing to leave the Princess to the protection of the Bedawi woman he returned quickly and strove to dissipate Nehushta's fears by telling her that they must have startled one of the numerous gazelles that wandered about the gardens. Nevertheless, he gave orders to have the guards doubled at every entrance to the Palace and to the royal enclosure.

But alas! precautions were in vain, for in spite of all efforts the return of Nehushta to Jerusalem did not remain a secret, as was to be expected in view of the dozens of slaves, eunuchs and attendants who had access even to the most private parts of the Palace buildings, and some of whom would have committed any crime or betrayed their own fathers for money.

A young Syrian eunuch, one of the many spies employed by Shebna, happening on one occasion to be sent with a message from the Queen Hephzibah to the Queen-Mother, was struck by the appearance of the latter's new tirewoman, for the distinctive cast of features of the B'ne-David was one that no disguise would hide for long. He communicated his suspicions to Shebna, who immediately charged Bela to find out who the new attendant was. It was a comparatively easy matter for the Edomite to bribe one or two of the doorkeepers and to obtain admittance to the Palace

gardens, where he had been told the new tirewoman sometimes went in the evening, and there one night, hidden behind some bushes, he had overheard part of a conversation between Amon and Nehushta which had revealed the whole strange truth to him, although, as has been seen, he narrowly escaped being caught by the Prince.

Shebna gloated over this discovery, which placed a new weapon in his hand in case of necessity, but made no further use of it. As for Bela, however, he had mentioned the matter to Queen Orpah at their last interview and ever since the fierce old woman had brooded over the news. An insane desire to kill with her own hands the offspring of King Hezekiah gradually took possession of her unbalanced mind. She bided her time, and at last one night, on the first of Elul, she succeeded in making her way from her house into the Palace gardens by means of a narrow court which lay between the Palace buildings and the outer walls of the Temple enclosure. The extreme western end of this court was not walled in, but consisted of a thick hedge of prickly cacti and tall bamboos which separated it from the gardens and which was considered impassable. The madness of vengeance, however, which had seized Orpah, impelling her to seek her victim at any cost, would have made her affront a hedge made of bronze knives and spears, and she struggled through the barrier to emerge with torn garments and face and arms and hands bleeding from a thousand cuts and scratches. In the exaltation of her insane hatred she did not feel the lacerations any more than she would have felt the scratch of a pin.

On that very night Nehushta had waited in the gardens for the welcome step of Amon, but the Prince

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did not come. The presentiment of evil within her heart was almost more than she could bear as she wandered slowly along the cool alleys followed by the Bedawi woman. The sky seemed like an immense canopy of ravens' wings studded with diamonds. The perfume of the magnolias was overpowering, and the fireflies hovered round her in countless myriads.

Suddenly a figure stepped out from behind a thick clump of syringa. By the dim light of the crescent moon Nehushta could see that it was an old woman wrapped in a torn black cloak and with hands and face dripping with blood. Instinctively she stepped back and her hand went out blindly to seek the Bedawi woman who had been walking close behind her, quiet and impassive. The old woman approached until her face almost touched Nehushta's, filling her with terror, and fascinating her as a bird is fascinated by a snake.

"Have I found thee at last, O daughter of mine enemy?" said the old woman slowly. "Seek not to deny it," she continued, noticing Nehushta's start of surprise, "thou accursed offspring of the B'ne-David!"

The Princess shrank back still farther, a great fear gripping her throat because of the bitter hatred she saw in the old woman's face.

"What wantest thou of me?" she asked in a faltering voice.

"I want all from thee!" answered the old woman fiercely, "and all will not be enough to repay me for what thy fathers have taken from me! An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth! Behold, I am the Avenger of Blood whom Great Chemosh hath sent to lie in wait for the offspring of the B'ne-David! I want the softness of thy flesh for the softness of my child's flesh! I want the grace of thy limbs for the

grace of his tender limbs ! I want thy life for his, O daughter of Hezekiah ! ” She plunged her hands suddenly into her withered bosom and drew forth what looked like a small amulet, strung on a scarlet thread which she wore around her neck. “ Look upon this, O spawn of Abijah’s son ! ’Tis all that is left of my son, O accursed one ; and until no more than this is left of thee and of thy father, and of thy father’s mother shall I not know peace ! ” The baleful glitter of her eyes was almost unbearable, and with a sudden movement her bony hands clutched at Nehushta’s throat. With a cry of terror the Princess freed herself, breaking the spell that had held her immovable. She fled towards the Palace with a wildly-beating heart, followed by the Bedawi woman, and ran blindly through the apartments, whence, on hearing her cries, a number of slaves streamed into the gardens. The Queen-Mother was on the roof-terrace above her apartments, and thither Nehushta sped and threw herself on her knees before her.

“ O grandmother ! grandmother ! ” she cried, clinging wildly to the Queen and, in her agitation, forgetting the need of concealment, “ save me ! ”

“ My child ! my beloved child ! what ails thee ? ” asked Queen Abijah, tenderly stroking the young girl’s hair and striving to calm her.

In a few broken words Nehushta related what had occurred, and the Queen felt as if an icy hand had suddenly closed around her heart. No one had ever told Nehushta of the existence of Queen Orpah, although she knew that there was some tragic secret connected with the solitary dweller in the House of Pharaoh’s Daughter whom no one ever saw. It seemed to the old Queen as if her husband’s deed of horror had not

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been fully expiated by his death in the flower of early manhood, but required still further sufferings and misery at the hands of his descendants to the second and third generations. She tried to comfort the weeping and terrified girl, and told her vaguely that the woman who had frightened her must have been a certain madwoman related to the B'ne-David, and allowed by their charity to dwell in the House of Pharaoh's Daughter, from which she must have escaped. "But fear nothing, little daughter! She cannot harm thee!" and the Queen took Nehushta in her arms and kissed her, and they sat for a while contemplating the silent night.

All around them on the heights they could see the watch-fires of the Assyrians like the glowing eyes of a troop of jackals waiting in the night around their dying prey. And suddenly a great shouting and tumult attracted the attention of the two women. They thought at first that the noise was due to the slaves who had rushed out into the gardens alarmed by Nehushta's cries, and who would by now probably have captured and led away the insane Queen. But it soon became apparent that the noise proceeded from the direction of the eastern walls and was caused by the progress of some attack or sortie. The platforms of the two towers on either side of the Water Gate became suddenly peopled with a mass of black manikins lighted up by the flare of flaming torches, and of burning pitch. Shrieks and the metallic clash of weapons reached the ears of the two women, and Nehushta was deeply moved at the thought that perhaps Amon was at that very moment in deadly danger.

The Assyrians, under cover of darkness, were delivering a strong attack on the Water Gate. Immediately

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after the King had rejected their terms they had begun their methodical preparations for a siege, and within a couple of days Jerusalem was almost entirely isolated from the outer world. An impassable circle of bronze was drawn around it by the hostile troops, and every day the bright blue and scarlet cloaks of Assyrian officers, mounted and on foot, dotted the neighbouring heights. Their wearers were taking stock from every side of the strength of the various towers, gates and walls, and trying to discover the disposition of the defending forces by small and well-directed local attacks. At the same time they began to build two enormous sloping ways or ramparts of stones and earth along which the great siege-machines would be gradually moved until they came within striking distance of the towers of Hananeel and Meah on the northern wall. It was here that they had decided to attempt to make a breach; this method of attack was almost impossible, or at any rate very difficult, against the other three sides of the town, owing to the deep valleys which surrounded it.

Amon had decided to adopt a strictly defensive position, except in case of absolute necessity, because of the comparatively small numbers of the defenders. The highly-skilled Hebrew archers and slingers, however, continually harassed the Assyrian sappers engaged on the construction of the ramparts for the siege-machines by discharging a hail of stones and arrows from the wooden casemates erected on the towers and at various points along the walls.

For nearly a fortnight this desultory fighting went on, while the Assyrians pursued their labours on the raised ways for the siege-machines. And then, early in the evening of the third of Elul, an attempt was

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made by the besiegers to break down the enormously strong doors of the Water Gate on the east of the town. A body of sappers, advancing under cover of their wickerwork shields, contrived to get to the very foot of the gate and attacked the massive bronze-studded panels with axes, while others strove to set the doors alight by piling up against them bundles of resinous wood and masses of pitch to which they set fire. From the neighbouring towers the guards poured down a hailstorm of stones, darts, and streams of water on the attackers, while a small troop, led by Amon himself, issued secretly from the postern of the Horse Gate a little to the north, and gliding along close to the wall, surprised them in the rear under cover of the darkness. After a fierce fight, during which twenty Assyrians were captured, the rest were put to flight, and the Hebrews returned jubilantly to the city.

It was the noise of this attack and of the successful sortie which Nehushta and the Queen Abijah had heard, and great excitement was caused near the gate by the immediate execution of the twenty prisoners, and the exhibition of their decapitated heads raised aloft on spears on the walls the following morning. But next morning, too, there came a discovery which quickly dispelled this excitement and left the defenders of Jerusalem thunderstruck and disheartened. The Prince Amon had disappeared.

The night before he had not slept in his quarters in the Barracks of the *Gibborim* in the Millo, neither was there any news of him at his house in the Upper City. There was no question of his having been killed or captured during the sortie, because after the Hebrew troops had returned to the city Shaftan had met and spoken to the Prince in the royal

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enclosure, and when the latter left him he intended going through the narrow lanes of Ophel to the stairs that led to the Pool of Siloam, his object being to visit the Captains of the gates in that vicinity, where it was reported that the Assyrians had also made an attack. He had refused to allow Shaftan to accompany him, and had not even taken a soldier with him, and now Shaftan cursed himself for having permitted the Prince to go alone. Since then, he had not been seen by any one, nor had he paid the intended visits to the southern gates. The Grand Vizier, after listening to Shaftan's suspicions, gave orders for an immediate search of Bela's house to be made, but although a party of soldiers visited every corner of it, and even broke into his harem, no traces of the Prince were found. The news of this inexplicable disappearance spread like wildfire throughout the city and the Palace, and Nehushta, seeing her worst fears realized, wept bitter tears and refused to be comforted. But two days later, at dawn on the Sabbath, even the excitement caused by this event subsided before the more terrible calamity which threatened disaster to the Holy City.

To explain the course of events it is necessary to go back a little. One day, soon after the beginning of the siege, it was reported to Amon that some of the Arab Sheikhs had attended a feast at the house of Shebna, and also that Shebna himself had made a night visit to Bela's house, a visit which had lasted nearly until dawn. Amon mentioned the matter to Shaftan, and the latter's suspicions that some treachery was in contemplation only served to increase the growing anxieties which beset the Prince on every side. The exigencies and whims of the Arabs and of their leaders were becoming every day greater. At first they had

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set an inexplicable value on the choice of the part of the wall which they were to defend being left to them, and then they had abandoned this desire with a still more inexplicable haste. In general they behaved with such lack of discipline that Amon began to consider the advisability of disarming them all and holding them as prisoners or turning them out of the city, trusting only to the Hebrew garrison and to the faithful B'ne-Jeruel. And had Amon known of Shebna's machinations, the Arabs' attitude would quickly have become intelligible to him. For the Vizier had lost no time in approaching them with a view to securing their help in his treacherous plot against the safety of Jerusalem. As usual, Bela had been his chosen intermediary, and the Edomite employed the three weeks that elapsed between his return from Lachish and the arrival of the Assyrians in cunning manoeuvres and intrigues, all having for their aim the destruction of the Arabs' tottering loyalty and the undermining of their paid allegiance. With the Sheikh of the B'ne-Jeruel, however, he had utterly failed. His first cautious words concerning the possibility of the Assyrians capturing Jerusalem had been met with cold contempt by Amru, and Bela soon gave up all hope of seducing any of Amru's tribesmen from the allegiance they had sworn to Amon.

After many precautions, however, a means was found of discussing the matter with the Sheikhs of the disloyal Arabs without exciting too much suspicion, although their visit to Shebna's house was subsequently reported to Amon. The Vizier invited Theokhares and the Carian captains to a feast at his house, and on the following night he likewise invited the Sheikhs of the B'ne-Taamirah and of the B'ne-Rushaidah.

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After a copious repast he led them to the flat roof of his house, and in guarded terms proposed that, as resistance to Assyria appeared hopeless, they should facilitate the entrance of the hostile troops into Jerusalem so as to avoid the horrors of a prolonged siege, a siege which could only have one ending. At the same time Shebna made a definite offer of a large sum of money, part of which he was prepared to pay at once, to the hesitating Sheikhs.

At first, in spite of the skilful preparation of the ground by Bela, there was some difference of opinion.

"Nay, Lord," said Waiti, the head Sheikh of the B'ne-Taamirah, "we have taken gold from the King of Judah and eaten of his salt, so that it would not be lawful for us to fight against him in his own house."

But Shebna's casuistry was quite equal to the occasion. He declared that he had never thought of asking them to fight against the Hebrews. He knew, however, that the defence of the eastern wall, from the Upper Tower to the Fountain Gate, had been entrusted to them, and all that he desired to be assured of was that if they became aware of any fighting or disturbance going on in the narrow lanes of Ophel behind that part of the wall on which they were stationed, they should adhere to the strict letter of their instructions and remain on the wall to defend it, whether it were attacked or not. As for the Fountain Gate, its defence would surely be entrusted to Hebrew warriors, so that they need not concern themselves with it.

Now the majority of the Arabs were discontented with the meagre pay which King Hezekiah was able to offer them, a pay which was already in arrears, besides which they had accepted service in Judah more with the idea of fighting in the open than of facing

the possible horrors of a prolonged siege. The prospect of the heavy sum offered by Shebna as the price of their passive treachery proved too much for their feeble scruples, and before they left his house the Sheikhs had agreed to do what he required of them. Nor did they trouble to inquire what the motives that prompted the Vizier to betray Jerusalem might be, although some of them could have made a shrewd guess.

Having thus assured himself of the support of the Arabs there only remained for Shebna to come to terms with the Assyrians, and here again the help of Bela proved invaluable to him. It was, of course, impossible to leave the city in the ordinary way, either by day or by night, but the Edomite's house, being built against the eastern wall, afforded a convenient means of access to the outer world. The top of the wall could easily be reached from the flat roof of the house, and on the outer side there was a drop of sixty feet. The nearest towers were some two hundred feet distant on either side, and as practically the greatest part of this eastern wall was guarded by the disloyal Arabs, no notice was taken of the fact that Bela one night climbed to the top of the wall from the roof of his house and, helped by three or four slaves, was lowered to the ground by means of a rope of twisted leather. He was absent some hours, during which he visited the Assyrian camp and arranged that the following night Shebna himself should come by the same road and propose his terms to the *Rab-shakeh*, terms which the Edomite professed to ignore.

Although the principal siege operations were being carried on to the north of the city, the *Rab-shakeh's* quarters were on the south, close to the brow of the rocky ridge overhanging the Valley of Hinnom. When

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Shebna was introduced into his tent there were present also the *Tartan* Nabuna'id, who was in charge of the purely military operations of the siege, just as the *Rab-shakeh* had been entrusted with the conduct of the diplomatic negotiations for the peaceful capitulation of the city, a *Rabsaris*, or Chief of the Eunuchs, and two or three scribes.

As Shebna stood bowing before the *Rab-shakeh*, the latter could not repress an ironical smile at the thought of the contrast between this interview and their last meeting outside the Fountain Gate. Then, although Shebna had not said a word, his attitude allowed it to be understood that he was at one with Eliakim and Joach ; but now he was all obsequiousness and unctuousness. Neither could the Assyrian hide a certain contempt, for although Bel-natsir was above all a diplomat, well used to dealing with all kinds of men, he could not help feeling a certain repugnance to a traitor. But it was not his place to indulge his feelings in that direction. His orders were not to leave a stone unturned to obtain the voluntary capitulation of Jerusalem if possible, rather than to carry the siege to its conclusion ; and the *Rab-shakeh*, therefore, listened in silence to the proposals of the Vizier, and feigned to ignore the patent insincerity of the excuses which he gave for his treachery.

Shebna explained to the *Rab-shakeh* the details of the plan by which he hoped to be able to introduce some hundreds of Assyrian soldiers into the city through the Spring Gihon, and asked what time would be necessary to make an opening in the heavy masonry and rocks with which the spring had been rendered inaccessible. The general turned inquiringly to his colleague.

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"About six or seven days, working only at night," answered the *Tartan*.

"Then we shall be ready to second your attempt at dawn of the second Sabbath after to-night, Lord Bel-natsir," and Shebna proceeded to explain why that would be the most favourable moment to attempt a surprise on account of the routine which governed the changing of the guard between the Palace and the Temple, a routine which had been observed ever since the days of King Solomon.

"Let strong attacks be delivered at the same time on the north and west of the city," continued Shebna, "so that many men will have to be withdrawn from the east and the south, where the real attacks will be delivered. And, furthermore, let your men be ordered to rush to the Palace as soon as the signal is given, for, if the King be killed, the news of his death may cause such dismay that all further resistance will collapse." A bitter hatred gradually animated Shebna's features as he spoke. He seemed to revel in the thought of the contemplated assassination of the King of Judah, and the ironical smile which still lingered on the face of the Bel-natsir deepened as he listened to the cold cynicism of the Vizier, planning the murder of the master who had raised him from the lowest depths, and to whose favour he owed everything.

"And what reward do you ask for this service to Assyria, my Lord Shebna?" asked Bel-natsir, looking straight into the Vizier's eyes.

"I am content to trust to the generosity of the Great King, Lord!" he replied. "Let my Lord bear in mind that if our plans succeed, as I have no doubt they will, I shall have been the means of saving the lives of many Assyrian soldiers, and let my Lord,

therefore, speak favourably for me to the King of the World !” The Vizier hesitated an instant, then continued swiftly, in a voice that was tremulous with emotion : “ Let my Lord say to the Great King that I am well acquainted with this stiff-necked people of Judah, and with all their works. If, in the past, I have been able to encourage them to plot with Egypt and to rebel, when I did not know the might of the King of the World, how easily, too, can I keep them in hand so that they rebel no more against the majesty of the Great King ! ”

To a man of Bel-natsir’s peculiar talents and experience Shebna’s ambition was as clear as the noonday sun, from his very first words. The *Rab-shakeh* understood well that the Vizier aimed at nothing less than the crown of Judah under the suzerainty of Assyria, but he gave no sign of comprehension, and just as he was about to speak again, Nabuna’id intervened in the conversation.

“ And if, through some mischance, the plot fail, O Vizier, what then ? ”

“ It shall not fail, Lord ! ” exclaimed Shebna vehemently. “ I myself shall be at the Palace to lead the soldiers, and if Hezekiah die not within an hour of their entrance into Jerusalem, thou may’st impale me before thy camp ! ”

When the grey dawn was just beginning to show in the East, Shebna crept out of the gateway of Bela’s house into his litter, but failed to see Amon’s spies, who duly reported his visit to the Prince.

CHAPTER XV

DURING the four days which preceded the attack on the Water Gate, Zibiah had felt a growing excitement, due to the thought that perhaps an opportunity of escaping from her prison might soon occur. For during those four days Bela, contrary to his usual custom, had not forced his hateful presence upon her. The only incident that came to vary the monotony of her life was the daily visit of Meshullemeth. Every evening at sundown the old hag hobbled up the crazy wooden staircase, removed the bolts from the beam that served to fasten the door of the inner room, and, placing a pitcher of water and a small loaf of bread just inside the doorway, immediately withdrew, fastening the door again securely behind her. When three nights had passed without a visit from Bela, a scheme began to shape itself within the little *Kedeshah's* mind. She would lie in wait behind the door, and as soon as the old woman opened it she would throw her scarf over her head and, with a dexterous twist of her small, lithe hands, she would strangle her before she could cry for help. She would trust to luck to get out of the house through the narrow passage which lay at the bottom of the staircase, for she knew that the outer gate was kept by an old, half-crippled slave, and she hoped that he might be asleep. If not, she had still one long-treasured resource to fall

back upon : the purse of gold which Amon had thrown to her on the night when she danced in the Palace, and which she had kept carefully hidden ever since in her garments. With its help she hoped to be able to silence the old slave.

But on the fourth night, when she had decided to make her attempt, her jailer failed to appear. Having worked herself into a state of wild excitement, Zibiah crouched like a panther in the shadow of the door until she ached in every limb, and when she became convinced that the old hag would not come that night her tears began to flow freely. She had to face not only the postponement of her plan, but also the prospect of hunger and thirst, for the meagre provision of bread and water allotted to her barely sufficed for the twenty-four hours.

She dragged herself wearily back to the little divan in the other room, and as she rocked herself to and fro in an agony of grief, she became aware, almost unconsciously, of a furious tumult which seemed to come from all around the house. She could hear the harsh cries of command of soldiers dashing past in the narrow lane outside, the sharp yells of the Arabs who were constantly on the watch on the city wall behind the house, and the distant clang of axes on metal. The window of the front room was too high up in the wall and too small, being a mere slit, to afford any view of the street below, but drawn by an irresistible sense of curiosity, she placed a wooden stool beneath the window of the back room, which commanded a good view of the court and of a stretch of the city wall behind the house. This window was some twenty feet above the ground and a large tree grew to the left of it, close enough for some of its branches to touch

the wall. Round the other three sides of the court, and on the same level as this window, there was a balcony which could be reached by a wooden staircase from a corner of the court.

Just as Zibiah looked out of the window, she became aware of a number of figures running into the court from the street. Some of them carried torches, and by their smoky light she was able to distinguish the hated and misshapen form of the Edomite. The men ran up the wooden staircase leading on to the balcony, entered one of the rooms, and emerged again on the roof, behind which rose the massive blackness of the city wall, crowned with yelling and excited Arabs. Zibiah surmised that an attack on that part of the wall, or on some neighbouring gate, must be in progress, and as she watched the weird-looking shapes moving about on the roof opposite a daring idea took shape in her brain.

The window through which she was looking was protected merely by a thin lattice of wood, which she could easily break with her strong young hands. Why not attempt to get through it, reach out for the branches of the tree, swing herself to the ground and, amid the evident confusion and darkness, attempt to escape into the street? Instinctively her fingers clenched themselves around the bars of the lattice-work, ready to break it asunder, when suddenly one of the Arabs on the wall, hit by a stray arrow, gave a wild shriek and fell back on to the earth-covered roof. In a few instants Zibiah realized despairingly that the opportunity, if there had ever been one, was lost, for the men were coming down from the roof bearing the body of the wounded Arab.

At that moment the little *Kedeshah's* gaze seemed

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to be drawn once more, against her will, to the court beneath her. The towering form of a man, strangely familiar, had just appeared from the passage-way. Almost at the same instant Bela and half a dozen of the armed slaves who were standing round the wounded Arab saw the Prince Amon. The Edomite shouted a word of command that sounded more like a snarl of rage than anything else, and the slaves, armed with clubs and short daggers, fell on the Prince like a pack of savage wolves, before he had time to draw his sword.

* * * * *

When, about half an hour earlier, Amon had left Shaftan in the royal enclosure, after the successful sortie against the assailants of the Water Gate, he did not at once make his way to the south-eastern gates as he intended. An Assyrian javelin, launched with terrific force, had grazed his right shoulder, inflicting a painful flesh wound, and it was only after he had had it bound by one of his slaves in the Millo that the Prince set forth, through the still-crowded lanes of Ophel, towards the rock-hewn steps which led down from the Old City of David to the Pool of Siloam.

Unlike Shaftan, Amon was not inclined to overmuch belief in the idea that Bela had had a hand in the events which led to the treacherous mutilation of the King's messengers, but the constant mistrust and suspicions expressed by the old warrior had succeeded, almost against his will, in rousing doubts within his mind. It was with a certain curiosity, therefore, that he noticed as he passed by the Edomite's house that the outer gate stood open. Hearing at the same time loud cries proceeding from the interior, Amon, with characteristic intrepidity, considered it would be a

good opportunity to ascertain for himself whether anything of a suspicious nature was taking place within, and walked boldly into the gateway. The gatekeeper's tiny cell was vacant and its occupant had evidently only just left it, for on his seat stood a bowl of smoking-hot food. Amon walked through the passage, and his eyes had hardly had time to take in the scene in the court before the slaves attacked him.

Fascinated and terrified, Zibiah watched the fight from the window. In spite of his enormous strength, Amon could not prevail against a dozen armed men, especially as he was unable to draw his sword. His right arm was growing stiffer every moment on account of his wound, and at the very beginning of the struggle the bandages were dragged off, so that his shoulder started to bleed afresh. By the mere strength of his colossal muscles, however, Amon crushed two of his assailants against his breast, so that the breath of life was squeezed out of them and they died; but the others fastened on to his limbs and body like so many hounds. In obedience to the shouted commands of the Edomite, they forbore from inflicting any deadly thrust with their weapons, striving only to bring the Prince to the ground. Hoping that some of the soldiers who were constantly passing in the street outside might hear him, Amon cried for help and called upon his *Gibborim*, but his desperate shouts were unheard. Besides, at the beginning of the attack one of the slaves, at Bela's bidding, had rushed to close the outer gate, thus rendering it impossible for any one to enter, even if the Prince's cries had been distinguishable amid the general hubbub. As for the Edomite, the sight of Amon's blood and of his helpless plight seemed to transform him into the semblance

of a malignant ape, and he literally danced round the struggling men, encouraging his slaves and shouting filthy insults.

At last, by sheer strength of numbers, they forced the *Gibbor* down on his knees, and as one of his hands momentarily broke loose, sending two or three of his assailants reeling to the ground, Bela flew at the outstretched fingers with the spring of a wildcat and bit deeply into them. As one might withdraw his hand from the sting of a troublesome gnat, so Amon pulled his hand away so suddenly that half a dozen of the cripple's teeth, loosened by age and disease, were pulled out of their sockets.

The sight of the Edomite's beastlike act proved too much for Zibiah. Unable any longer to restrain her feelings, a shriek of horror burst from her lips, and as Bela, mad with pain and rage, looked up, the sudden flare of a torch illumined the *Kedeshah's* ghastly white face at the lattice. Once more she had witnessed his defeat and humiliation!

The mighty Prince, even though holding ten antagonists at bay, had swept him aside like some foul insect, leaving him maimed and bleeding. The knowledge of this sent a white-hot flame of hatred through Bela's evil mind. Seizing an axe which lay on the ground and watching for a favourable opportunity, the Edomite, whose hatred endowed him for the moment with superhuman strength, dealt a blow at Amon's head which would have killed any other man instantly. The Prince's leather helmet partly protected him, but in spite of it his gigantic form collapsed under the violence of the stroke, while a fresh stream of blood poured down his face.

Faint with horror, Zibiah saw the slaves drag his

prostrate body across the court to a low door in the left-hand wall, through which they carried it, followed by the still raving Edomite. A considerable time elapsed before they came out again, and then fresh fears assailed the little *Kedeshah*, for she saw Bela making straight towards the passage-way, and she feared that he was coming to visit her.

She had never been able to understand the horribly malignant and complex nature of Bela, a nature which first prompted him to treat her with refined cruelty because of fancied wrongs to his morbid self-love, and then drove him to wreak on her all the embittered rancour of his soul against every man who was sound and straight. Swiftly she drew the little stool away from the window, fled into the other room and, lying on the divan, feigned to be asleep, for she was not quite certain whether the momentary flare of the torch had betrayed her presence as a witness of Bela's discomfiture, or whether her cry of horror had been heard. With beating heart she heard his stealthy footsteps come creeping up the stairs, and at last her agitation grew to such a pitch that she could no longer feign sleep, but sat up as if suddenly awakened.

He appeared on the threshold, all bloody and disfigured, holding a small lamp in his hand. The loss of his front teeth had caused his lips to sink in in a peculiar manner, giving him an aspect so repulsive as to make the miserable girl shudder with disgust. He seemed like the very embodiment of evil as he advanced towards the helpless Zibiah and placed the lamp on a little stool.

"Thou accursed spawn of lust," he said slowly, "enjoy thy triumph while thou may'st, for it shall be thy last one!" His words sounded horribly clipped

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and lisping, and at intervals he spat out mouthfuls of blood.

As the terrified girl did not reply but merely shrank as far as she could from him, the cripple, with a sudden spring, caught hold of her and dragged her to the floor. She seemed to be the prey of some terrible nightmare as she listened to the hissing words that came forth from that vile, blood-splashed countenance, so closely held to hers as almost to touch it.

“Never again shalt thou gaze upon him, O daughter of impurity! Didst think his limbs were big and finely shapen? They lie crushed beneath the rocks now! Didst think his features were beautiful and pleasant to look upon, more pleasant than mine, eh, little one?” The Edomite gave a horribly shrill laugh, which froze the blood in her veins. “If thou couldst see his face now, O daughter of filth, thou wouldst fall sick of love for mine,” continued Bela. “He is down, deep down in the bowels of the earth, and perchance he is already dead; and if he be not dead, he shall soon die of hunger and thirst, amid corruption; and if he be so strong that he die not, then two days from now, when the Assyrians break into the city through the way of the waters”—in his rage he forgot all prudence and once more babbled wildly of the plot—“they shall find him on their path, and his body shall grace one of those impaling stakes beyond the walls!”

With a final snarl of rage he threw the miserable Zibiah from him and left the room, bolting the door behind him.

Next morning, when the news of Amon's disappearance caused deep consternation throughout the city, Shebna, surmising that his accomplice had in some way carried out his long-planned revenge on the

Prince, immediately dispatched one of his numerous spies to warn Bela that there was a hue and cry for the Hebrew leader, and that it was more than probable that his house would be searched.

For a moment the slave-dealer was in a quandary, for he knew that Zibiah had witnessed the whole tragedy of the attack, and that he would no more be able to stop her from blurting out what she knew than he would be able to stop the soldiers from ransacking every nook and cranny of his house. He felt confident of being able to keep the place where he had disposed of the Prince's inanimate body a secret, but what should he do with Zibiah? In his anxiety he consulted his mother, and the old hag was ready with a suggestion.

"Leave her to me, O my son. Yesterday, in the excitement of the moment, I forgot to take her the usual portion of bread and water, so that this morning she will be weak and hungry. Thou knowest that I am skilled in the making of all manner of potions and secret beverages; let me therefore add something to her drinking-water. In the torture of her thirst she will drink greedily, and the water will throw her into a deep sleep, which will last long enough to prevent her betraying what she saw."

Bela readily agreed to this suggestion, and when later in the morning a body of soldiers, led by Shaftan, ransacked his house from top to bottom, forced their way into his harem and insisted upon being admitted to the rooms over the gateway, they saw nothing in the latter but the sleeping Zibiah, whom Shaftan immediately recognized as the girl that he had seen redeemed from the Temple of Ashtoreth, but whom he had no authority or particular desire to disturb.

Such was the potency of the drink mixed by the old woman that Zibiah did not wake until early the following morning. And it was only when, aching and confused, she noticed that the sun was not long risen that she realized how she must have slept through the whole of the preceding day and night, and the thought that some further treachery might have been devised against the Prince during the hours of her slumber tormented her greatly.

Her sleep had been heavy and dreamless, but now the whole dreadful scene of two evenings before rushed back into her memory, filling her with grief and anguish at the fate of Amon, the man whom she had grown to worship from afar and almost to idolize. She was seized with a burning desire to ascertain, at any risk to herself, whether he were dead or alive. She decided not to carry out her first plan of attacking the old woman and escaping into the street, but instead to watch for a favourable opportunity of getting out of the window overlooking the court by the help of the tree. She would then endeavour to make her way through the mysterious little doorway in the court to find out what had become of the Prince.

Aided by her recollection of Bela's wild talk, her instincts told her that the Prince was probably imprisoned in some secret underground dungeon, and if, by the will of the gods, she could reach him, and he were still alive, she would do her utmost to free him. She would earn his undying gratitude by revealing to him that a dastardly plot was afoot to betray the city to the Assyrians, some plot in which Bela himself was implicated, and she felt such infinite faith in the Prince's power to conquer all obstacles, if once she

could get to him, that she felt sure he would defeat the plot and bring about the destruction of all his enemies. As for herself, she would ask for no reward. Let him only deliver her from the clutches of the accursed Edomite and allow her to serve him as the meanest of his slaves, and her heart would rejoice for ever.

That night was the eve of the Sabbath, and for a long time after the old woman had brought her the usual small loaf of bread and jar of water, Zibiah stood silently watching at the little window. She noticed great movements going on in the house and in the court; men seemed to be coming in continually with messages from outside. Several times she saw figures climb on to the wall from the roof of the house, while one or two Arabs came down and were taken to speak to Bela in his audience-chamber, which faced Zibiah. Time after time she heard the creaking of the bronze hinges of the outer gate, and on three distinct occasions she saw men, carrying bundles and with small hand-lamps, go across to the little doorway in the left-hand wall of the court, disappear within for a little while and reappear a little later.

At last, towards midnight, almost complete silence prevailed, and Zibiah decided that the moment had come for her desperate enterprise. She felt a strange and ardent faith in her success, and coupled with it there was an instinctive belief, which amounted almost to a certainty, that she would not only find Amon still alive, but that she would be the means of saving his life and of saving Jerusalem, the city which was so closely identified, in her mind, with the brilliant Prince to whom she had utterly given her poor crushed heart.

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The thin crescent of the moon had just risen over the summit of the wall, giving but a faint light, but the whole sky was encrusted with jewel-like stars. The faint plashing of the fountain in the middle of the court was the only sound that broke the oppressive stillness of the night. The air was filled with a strong, mingled scent of jessamine and geraniums.

She found that the task of breaking the light latticework was not so easy as she had expected, but, setting her little white teeth and exerting all her strength, she successfully snapped the first pieces. The chief danger consisted in the loud cracking noises made by the splintering wood, and after each effort she waited several minutes before proceeding, watching intently to see whether any one had been disturbed or awakened. At last enough of the latticework was broken away to allow of the passage of her slender body. Thinking that perhaps Amon, if she found him, might be weak with hunger, she took her untouched loaf, dropped it gently into the court, and, with wildly-beating heart, drew herself up to the window. Those branches of the tree which brushed it were mere tendrils, far too weak to bear the weight of her body, but, fortunately, a part of the wall above and below the window was covered with thick ivy, springing from the same corner in which the tree grew. Clinging like a wild thing to this growth she was able to win a little distance to the left of the window, opposite to where a thick branch of the tree jutted against the wall. With a silent prayer, she hung on to the ivy with one hand, caught at the branch with the other, and, swinging herself across, she was soon able to reach the trunk. A few seconds later, panting with excitement, she stood at last on the ground.

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On the threshold of Bela's audience-chamber a couple of slaves slept uneasily, and one of the little hand-lamps still burnt outside the doorway on which all her hopes were centred. The heavy wooden beam which ordinarily served to keep the door closed lay on the ground beside it, as if all further precautions had become needless. Zibiah had picked up the loaf and placed it in her garments and, seeing some empty jars about, she filled one as noiselessly as possible at the basin in the middle of the court. She took the lamp in her right hand, pushed the door open, and boldly entered.

She found herself in a kind of storeroom, filled with bags of grain, bunches of dried vegetables and small jars of oil. In the middle of this chamber a square cavity in the floor revealed some stone steps going down into the blackness, and her heart gave a great throb at this first confirmation of her suspicions. Laying down the water-jar for a few moments, she took the precaution of refilling her little lamp from one of the oil-jars and then ventured slowly down the stone steps, until she came to a small vaulted chamber. She could not repress a shudder of horror when she noticed that a track of fresh bloodstains led across the chamber to a square opening cut in the rock in the opposite wall. This opening was closed by a heavy wooden door which now stood open, revealing a sloping passage. For a moment her heart misgave her, for she was afraid of what she might find in the blackness beyond, but the steadfastness of her purpose to save Amon's life gave her renewed courage, and, bending low, she proceeded carefully down the passage.

She found the Prince lying on his side, bound with many turns of rope, and his great bulk almost blocked

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the narrow tunnel. A deep groan escaped from his lips as the light of the lamp fell on his eyes and Zibiah's heart leapt with joy at this evidence that Amon still lived. A single word came unceasingly from his dry, cracked lips, "Water, water!" and the little *Kedeshah*, her heart filled with pity at the thought of the tortures he must have suffered, congratulated herself on her forethought as she held the water-jar to his mouth.

He drank greedily and she shuddered when she saw the marks of the Edomite's fiendish cruelty. His leather helmet had been removed or had fallen off, and a deep gash disfigured the left side of his forehead, where the axe had bitten to the bone. His hair and beard were matted with blood, and the stout cords with which he was bound had been wetted with water after having been tied as tightly as possible. This had caused them to shrink and they had sunk deeply into his body, forming pits in his swollen and tumefied flesh and causing excruciating torture.

"Courage, O Prince!" said Zibiah joyfully, as she knelt down and started the task of unloosening the bonds that kept him captive. At first, half dazed with hunger, thirst and loss of blood, he seemed to be unconscious of his deliverer's identity, and it was only when, with some of the water and a piece of linen torn from her garments, she had washed the blood away from his wounds that some dim recollection of the little *Kedeshah* penetrated his mind.

"What doest thou here, and what is thy name?" he muttered faintly.

"Zibiah, O Lord, and Our Lady Ashtoreth has permitted that I, in my weakness, should be the appointed

means of saving thee, in thy strength, and perchance of saving thy Holy City ! ”

“ The Holy City ! ” cried Amon, raising himself on his elbow, “ What meanest thou, girl ? Speak quickly ! ” But his limbs were so cramped that he could scarcely move, and in his weak condition the effort was too much for him. He fell back again, half fainting, and Zibiah gave him some more water and insisted upon his eating a small piece of the bread she had brought with her. Not until then did she tell him of her suspicions and of what she had been able to gather from Bela’s wild threats.

Amon’s quick mind immediately grasped the significance of her information, and it flashed into his mind that this narrow tunnel must be the upper part of the “ *tsinnor* ” or secret conduit through which one of King David’s soldiers, some centuries earlier, had penetrated into the stronghold of Jerusalem. This “ *tsinnor* ” was later enlarged into the great system of galleries and shafts used to communicate with the Gihon spring, and the Prince realized what a serious danger would threaten the Holy City if the Assyrians were successful in making their way through the passages from the spring.

With the lamp in his hand and bent nearly double because of his great height, he proceeded carefully along the passage, which gradually became higher, enabling him to stand upright, until he came to the well-like cavity at the bottom of which lay the tunnel that led to the spring. Had Amon known or imagined how near the danger was—for the treacherous attack had been planned to take place that very night, at the approach of dawn—he would not have lost a single moment before endeavouring to cut his way out of the

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Edomite's house and warning the garrison. For, by some extraordinary oversight, thinking perhaps that his chances of escape were negligible, they had omitted to remove his sword, and his heart rejoiced as he once more grasped its trusty hilt.

But the Prince felt so exhausted by reason of his wounds and his long fast that he resolved to snatch a brief rest. Enjoining upon Zibiah the supreme importance of keeping awake, he stretched himself down on the floor of the tunnel, not far from the shaft, at the spot where the passage suddenly became much higher. And for the first and last time the little *Kedeshah*, her heart bursting with happiness and joy because of the words of thanks and gratitude which Amon had spoken to her, was able to watch over the wounded Prince while he slept with his head in her lap.

* * * * *

It had been agreed that Assyrian soldiers to the number of four hundred, to be reinforced later through the same underground road, should assemble in the court of Bela's house about an hour before dawn. As the opening in the masonry which covered the spring had purposely been made barely large enough to allow of the passage of only one man at a time, in order not to rouse the suspicions of the watchers on the walls, the men, under the guidance of half a dozen officers, started on their perilous adventure about the fourth hour after midnight, for they had to pass through a long tunnel and also to climb, by the help of ladders, to the top of the well-like shaft connecting the tunnel from the spring with the passage leading into the vaulted chamber beneath Bela's house. They were then to rush out of the house in time to reach the

Palace just before daybreak For it was at daybreak on the Sabbath, at the moment of offering the morning sacrifice, that two companies of *Gibborim*—about two hundred men—went up into the Temple to relieve the one company that guarded it on weekdays, and which came down to guard the Palace during the Sabbath. Therefore, at a particular moment of the early dawn of the Sabbath, the whole of the three companies of *Gibborim* were assembled in the Temple to witness the Sabbath morning sacrifice, and the Palace was left practically denuded of guards. The flowing of the spring, too, which took place every nine or ten hours and lasted for nearly an hour, had occurred before midnight, so that there was plenty of time during the fall of the waters to penetrate into the underground passages.

Zibiah's senses seemed to be preternaturally acute, and about a couple of hours after Amon had fallen asleep she noticed that to the diminishing murmur of the ebbing water at the bottom of the shaft other strange noises had been added. She heard faint metallic sounds, and once she fancied she heard a shout echoing through the cavernous hollows of the hill. Soon there could be no doubt that there were moving and whispering beings in the vicinity, and, carefully reaching out with one hand to the little lamp which still burnt on the ground near them, she held it up and projected its light in the direction of the shaft, which was but a few feet distant. To her utter horror the feeble light revealed the head and shoulders of an Assyrian soldier, on the point of raising himself over the edge of the shaft. With a shriek of terror she woke Amon, and instantly the Prince rose to his feet and drew his sword. His short sleep seemed to have

restored not only his strength but also his clarity of mind and his power of quick decision.

Running forward he thrust his sword clean through the throat of the Assyrian, who had already got one knee on the edge of the shaft. Without a cry the soldier sank back and they could hear the shouts and imprecations of his comrades down below, who had been assisting him. Turning instantly Amon fled back along the passage, while Zibiah, instinctively divining what was required of her, fled before him with the little lamp. For a few short instants he stopped at the outlet into the vaulted chamber to place the heavy beam which kept the door closed in position, and by the time this was done they could hear the heavy, crashing blows of the Assyrians' axes on the other side of it. Thrusting Zibiah behind him and bidding her follow, the Prince leapt up the stone steps and reached the storeroom above in time to see the door open, letting in a number of half-awakened slaves bearing torches.

And then to Zibiah, the little *Kedeshah* born of the passing lust of a Tyrian sailor and reared among the foulest corruption—to Zibiah, the little tender rosebud, soiled ere it had half opened, there came the desire to give all that was left to her, her life, in an attempt to save that of the great and noble Prince whose few words of kindness had fallen on her heart like drops of blessed rain on a parched desert.

Quick as lightning she ran past Amon's outstretched sword-arm, dashed her lamp at one of the slaves, setting his garments on fire, and flew like a wildcat at the throat of another, burying her teeth deep in his shoulder. The appearance of the Hebrew Prince and the attack of the little *Kedeshah* were so unexpected

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that for a few moments the slaves wavered, but suddenly, ere Amon could interfere, one of them, dashing in sideways, plunged his dagger to the hilt into Zibiah's back. At the sight of her life-blood, willingly poured forth to save him, the madness of battle once more came upon Amon.

His sword flashed right and left like an avenging destroyer, as he hacked his way through the now terrified slaves, some of whom, to escape from his fury, threw themselves headlong down the stone steps. In a few instants Amon was out in the court. There, standing like some impotent spirit of evil in front of the audience-chamber, was Bela himself, vainly trying to encourage other slaves to attack the Prince. But this time there was no question of surprising a man unable to draw his weapon, and the wretched slaves hung back. For a moment Amon felt tempted to stay and destroy the vile cripple as if he were some noxious vermin, but there was too much at stake. At any moment the Assyrians might break through from below and come tumbling up to spread death and confusion amid the unprepared garrison. Amon's first duty was to save the Holy City and to gather reinforcements to stop the ingress of any more enemies through the underground passage. The old gatekeeper, roused from his sleep, came out of his little cell in affright and feebly tried to bar the Prince's road, only to fall instantly with a sword thrust through the heart. As Amon rushed out into the street, nearly deserted at that hour, the sounds of great Assyrian attacks being delivered at various points reached his ears. Bela's house was slightly nearer to the Fountain Gate than to the Water Gate, which lay to the north, and for a moment he hesitated in which direction to seek aid.

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But the knowledge that the Water Gate fell within that part of the wall defended by the disloyal Arabs helped him to decide. At the Fountain Gate were the B'ne-Jeruel and a good many of his own *Gibborim*, and the Prince rushed down the winding, narrow street in that direction.

CHAPTER XVI

NEHUSHTA had thought that there would be no greater sorrow than fell to her lot during the uncertain days when she had to face the possibility of being sacrificed to appease the Great King's wrath; but now, the unexplained disappearance of the Prince Amon brought an immense and overpowering despair into her life, a despair that threatened wellnigh to overthrow her reason. To have escaped the dire peril that came near to soiling and destroying utterly her maidenly soul, to have known the greatness of Amon's ardent love, to have looked forward to a lifelong happiness with him, and then to lose him in this cruel and sudden fashion, without even knowing what evil fate might have befallen him!

The day on which the Prince's disappearance became known and the following one passed in an agony of tempestuous grief for the young Princess, a grief interrupted for a few short instants by a visit from the King, who tried in vain to console her. But neither he nor her grandmother, nor the Queen, her mother, were successful. No morsel of food passed her lips, and sleep fled far from her weeping eyes. In two days she became pale and wan, and it seemed as if the Angel of Death were already stretching forth his hand to pluck the young flower of her life.

On the eve of the Sabbath, just after sunset, the

King, accompanied by the Holy Prophet Isaiah, paid another visit to the Queen-mother's apartments, and for a little while Nehushta's sorrow grew less as she listened to the comforting words of the Holy Prophet, never unmindful of any grief.

"Bethink thee, O daughter," he said, as Nehushta stood before him, a sudden gleam of hope in her eyes, "that our Amon is a strong man and a cunning one in warfare. The Holy One may have put some deep scheme into his mind, whereby to defeat the Assyrians, and he may even now be engaged therein."

"But why should he not let me have news of him, if indeed it were necessary for him to lie hidden for a time, O my Father?" cried the Princess, her eyes filling anew with tears.

"Nay, O daughter, messengers are perilous in time of war, and he may not have a trustworthy one at hand."

A sudden silence followed the Prophet's words. His eyes closed for an instant and he passed his hand slowly over his forehead. The Divine force which seemed always to emanate from his noble personality grew almost visibly stronger as he turned towards the King.

"Do thou, O King, go into the Temple to-night before the dawn. Betake thyself alone into the Holy Place while it is yet dark, and at the time when the call comes for the priests to prepare themselves for the morning sacrifice, humble thyself before the sacred Veil which hideth the Holy of Holies. Lay bare thy heart before the Holy One of Israel, and perchance He will hearken unto thy prayers."

And so it came to pass that that night, about an hour before the dawn, the King, accompanied only by Joab, his faithful cupbearer, proceeded across the narrow

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court which separated the Palace from the Temple, to the King's Gate, where he was met by one of the chief priests and where he dismissed Joab, bidding him go back to the royal apartments and await his return. The chief priest led the King as far as one of the side doors of the sanctuary, and Hezekiah, alone, went into the Temple of his God to lay his sorrows before Him.

* * * * *

The Assyrian invaders, having smashed the wooden door which impeded their passage, poured out into the court of Bela's house. The Edomite, still shaking with impotent rage and unaware of Zibiah's intervention and tragic death, hurried their departure as much as possible, for he knew that Amon's escape boded ill for the success of the plot.

The deep, transparent blue of the sky was just beginning to turn to purple and the stars were beginning to pale, when some four hundred Assyrians, scattering the few inhabitants who were already about like wind-blown leaves, came forth from Bela's house. Two hundred of them, led by a "*Rab-kitsir*,"¹ turned to the right and dashed, at a rapid trot, up the narrow street which led to the principal southern entrance of the royal enclosure. The other two hundred, going to the left, turned into a street which ran from the Millo to the great stairs on the western side of the Pool of Siloam. Their object was to attack the defenders of the Fountain Gate from the back, thus facilitating the success of the Assyrian assault at that point.

Because no one had thought of the possibility of an attack from within the city itself, the bulk of the garrison was employed in the defence of the walls, and at that moment, as had been agreed between Shebna and

¹ Commander of a "*kitsru*," or battalion.

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the *Rab-shakeh*, terrific assaults were being delivered on every gate, assaults which it took every effort of the defenders to repulse. For this reason very few soldiers were left in charge of internal gates and points of vantage.

The wall of the royal enclosure, being an internal one, was not more than twenty feet high, and dozens of the Assyrians, especially trained for such work, swarmed over it on both sides of the gateway as agilely as monkeys, by standing on each other's shoulders. The Hebrew guards did not even have time to shout an alarm. Taken in front and in the rear, they were almost instantly slaughtered to the last man.

And then it was that Sabdai, the Assyrian leader, in spite of the iron discipline which punished the disobedient or unsuccessful commander with death, made a fatal mistake.

His orders were to make straight for the Palace as soon as they had penetrated within the royal enclosure, and, profiting by the temporary absence of the *Gibborim*, to capture and kill the King at any cost. Instead of which, yielding to his inordinate greed of gold and irresistibly attracted by tales of the boundless wealth which was supposed to be still hidden in the Temple, he divided his men. One-half were ordered to force the Gate of the Couriers, which lay less than a hundred and fifty feet in front of them and gave admittance to the court of the Palace, while the remainder, led by Sabdai himself, continued on their way straight across the royal enclosure, passing between the Hall of Judgment on their left and the Carian barracks on their right. The few slaves who were about at that early hour fled precipitately at the sight of the Assyrians, who entered the Temple enclosure

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at its south-eastern angle, through the enormous porch of a hundred columns known as Solomon's Porch.

Dozens of white-robed priests were hastening from their cells, built along the inside of the walls of the Temple enclosure, to the inner court, in order to join in the offering of the morning sacrifice. Drunk with the lust of blood, the savage Assyrians, laughing at the shrieks of the flying priests, killed right and left, like so many butchers. Their swords dripping with blood and their faces aflame with greed and cruelty, they rushed up the great stairs that led to the inner court and there, for a few tense moments they were suddenly held, not only by the solemnity and the strangeness of the scene which met their eyes, but also by the new danger which faced them, a danger which they had not foreseen.

On the north and south sides of the court, immovable and glittering, stood the whole of the three hundred *Gibborim*, with their golden shields, awaiting the consummation of the sacrifice, after which one-third of their number, relieved of their week's guard in the Temple, would go down to the Palace. A number of priests were going up the sloping ascent to the great stone altar in the centre of the court, bearing small bundles of wood. As each bundle was thrown on the smoking hearth, the bright flames leapt up and were reflected from the curved horns of brass which twisted up from the four corners of the altar. Behind it towered the enormous pyloned front of the sanctuary itself, with the two sacred pillars of brass, Jachin and Boaz, one on each side of it. Scattered here and there were the great marble tables on which the victims were dismembered, and their flesh washed and salted, while

ninety-three priests, each one bearing one of the golden utensils used in the sacrificial service, stood around the base of the altar.

At the precise instant when the Assyrians burst into the court, the most sacred moment of the whole ceremony had been reached. The doors of the sanctuary, stripped of their golden coverings to satisfy the Great King's greed, were thrown open, the officiating priest within the Temple scattered the incense on the altar, and while three loud blasts were sounded on silver trumpets, the sacrificing priest drew his knife across the throat of the yearling lamb which constituted the first part of the Sabbath morning offerings.

Instead of the murmur of prayer that should have arisen at this solemn moment, a great cry of mingled horror and rage burst from all those who witnessed the sacrilegious irruption of the Assyrians. For an instant Sabdai, quailing with fear as he realized the consequences of his disobedience of orders, felt tempted to turn and join his companions in the Palace. But it was too late, and all he could do was to rally his men around him and prepare to sell his and their lives as dearly as possible.

For only some fifteen or twenty Assyrians, those who first penetrated into the inner court, realized the danger that faced them and as they were almost instantly attacked, those behind them, thinking that their companions were merely engaged in butchering defenceless priests, pushed in through the comparatively narrow gateway, until they found themselves surrounded by the *Gibborim*. By this time a general alarm had been given by the flying priests; two hundred Carians, led by Theokhares, hastened down from the Tower of Hananel, at the north-eastern corner of the Temple

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enclosure, and poured into the inner court through the three gateways, completely cutting off any channel of escape.

The Assyrians fought bravely against the heavy odds, but the *Gibborim*, who were led by Shaftan in the absence of the Prince Amon, fought as if they were possessed by demons. In vain did the invaders try to get nearer to the altar, hoping perhaps that the Hebrews would hesitate to desecrate it by spilling human blood upon it. The impassable ring of bronze which encompassed them grew ever smaller and smaller, and in a short while, though many of the brave *Gibborim* and Carians had fallen, there remained not a single living or unwounded Assyrian within the sacred precincts.

But unfortunately for the Hebrews, although Sabdai and his men were utterly destroyed, the remaining Assyrians, who were successful in forcing their way into the Palace, were the cause of great misfortune. And although they failed to accomplish one of their main objects, the murder of the King, because of the Divine inspiration of the Holy Prophet which had prompted him to seek the safety of the Temple, still they were able to run riot for a length of time sufficient to produce dire results.

They climbed over the twenty-foot inner wall on either side of the Gate of the Couriers as they had climbed over the wall of the royal enclosure, took the guards in the rear, butchered them mercilessly, and opened the gates to their companions. In the half-light which preceded the dawn a strange, wild figure, bearing a torch, came flying across the court to meet them, closely followed by two slaves. It was Queen Orpah, unveiled, her snow-white hair flying behind

her, the light of madness glittering in her eyes.

Well warned by Shebna's spies of the coming of the Assyrians, her brain aflame with the lust of vengeance, the vengeance for which she had waited thirty-five long years, she had spent the whole night on the roof of her house, her gaze concentrated with superhuman intensity on the court below, awaiting the coming of those who would at last place revenge within her grasp.

Bela, who had accompanied the Assyrians, rejoiced at the sight of the insane Queen, for he already foresaw an easy fulfilment of the Vizier Shebna's plot, and he could afford to bide his time for revenge on the Prince Amon, when once the city should have fallen into the hands of the besiegers.

"Greetings, O Queen!" he cried, "at last Great Chemosh brings thee vengeance, for which thy soul has thirsted so long. Lead thou these friends of ours and let them put an end to the B'ne-David and all their seed for evermore!"

Foreseeing possible difficulties on account of the division of the Assyrian forces, which he had not dared to oppose, Bela himself resolved to return swiftly to his own house, where ten Assyrians had been left to keep the underground communication open. He would himself go along the secret passages and beg for reinforcements to be sent as quickly as possible along the same road, before the Hebrews discovered the source whence their foes had penetrated into the city.

A broken-nosed slave and an old woman had followed Queen Orpah across the court. Trembling lest they should be punished as they had been a little while before, when the Queen escaped from their surveillance into the Palace gardens and tried to attack the Princess Nehushta, they tried in vain to persuade her to return

to her house. Orpah turned suddenly to one of the Assyrian officers.

“Kill!” she cried, with a snarl of rage, pointing to the wretched slaves, and almost before the words had left her lips, the two miserable creatures lay dead at her feet.

“Come now, O Assyrians,” she continued, “there is still more killing to be done. This day your swords shall drink the blood of the great and of the mighty, so that they shall be brought low. They shall drink the blood of the B’ne-David and that of all their accursed brood!” Losing sight of her immediate object, she began to curse and rave: “Cursed be Hezekiah, and cursed be Nehushta, his daughter! And cursed above all be the woman Abijah, who stole my husband from me and made bitter his heart against me!”

Knowing that they had little time to lose, the Assyrians pushed the old woman aside roughly, but refrained from killing her, for they could see that madness had come upon her. They intended to find their way unassisted to the King’s apartments, but suddenly the old Queen seemed to regain control of herself and ran before them to point out the way. Slaves and Palace attendants, hearing unaccustomed sounds, began to appear from every quarter, and the order to kill again went forth. Not a soldier was left in the Palace, and the miserable crowd of slaves and servants, being unarmed, or having at most only wretched sticks or staves of ivory, were unable to offer any resistance. Before a dozen of them had been slaughtered the rest fled like so many affrighted animals to hide themselves in every nook and cranny of the Palace and the gardens, while some managed to escape into the outer royal enclosure and thence into the streets, spreading con-

fusion and terror, and crying that the Assyrians had captured the city.

Still more slaves and officials came rushing down from the great terrace and stairs in front of the main Palace building, striving only to escape from what they thought was the final assault. But Orpah, unheeding and unseeing, led only by her blind hatred, went straight across the court towards the private entrance to the Palace, which lay between the main building and the House of Pharaoh's Daughter. The doorkeepers had fled at the first alarm, but in their place stood Shebna, who had spent the night in hiding in Orpah's house and now stepped forth, ready to fulfil his undertaking to the *Rab-shakeh*.

For an instant his life was in danger, for the Assyrians, seeing in him only a Hebrew official, would have killed him; but he drew forth from his garments a ring which the *Rab-shakeh* had given him as a safe-conduct, and, taking a dagger from the belt of one of the soldiers, he rushed forward through the royal apartments, followed by Orpah and the soldiers. His gross, fleshy form panted with the unwonted excitement and with the lustful anticipation of murder. Already in his mind's eye he saw himself gloating, as he thrust the poniard into the throat of the King who had brought shame and humiliation upon him.

The whole of this part of the Palace consisted of a series of rooms, on two floors, surrounding a central court, out of which there were only two issues, one communicating with a small court at the back of Orpah's house, and the other with the long, narrow court which lay between the Palace and the outer Temple walls. The sleeping apartments of the King were on the western side of this central court and

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through them one reached the apartments of the Queen-Mother which lay at the very back of the Palace buildings, in the right wing, as well as the harem. The soldiers, led by Shebna, tore through the royal dwelling, sacked and ravaged everything, pulled down hangings, smashed priceless furniture, and filled their hands with the many precious objects of gold and silver which lay about. Everywhere dazed and half-awakened officials and slaves rose up in their path and were mercilessly slaughtered, like so many dogs.

The King's sleeping chamber lay empty, but within its threshold there stood the faithful Joab. Refusing to give any information regarding his royal master's whereabouts he fell, pierced by a dozen swords.

A chill of fear struck to the heart of Shebna when he realized that his prey had escaped him and recollected the rash undertaking he had given to the *Rab-shakeh*. For if the Assyrians failed to capture the city, then he was utterly lost. Dozens, nay hundreds of slaves and others had by now seen him and knew that the Vizier Shebna was a traitor and a murderer. But there was no time for any thought, for Orpah, babbling wildly, still pressed on like an avenging fury.

All memories of King Hezekiah had long since been swept from her disordered brain. Cleared of every thought and image, it now held but one imperious desire, searing it like a white-hot iron and impelling her to find and kill the woman she had never seen, the innocent cause of all her sorrows. Hoping still to find the King, the soldiers and Shebna followed her into the apartments of the Queen-Mother, amid the shrieks of women and of terror-stricken eunuchs.

All her life Queen Abijah had been haunted by the fear that some day she would be called upon to expiate

her husband's crimes, and now she felt that the hour had come. She would have awaited the end calmly, but Nehushta, mad with fear at the clamour of the approaching soldiers, entreated her to make an attempt to escape, and they fled into the innermost room of all, which communicated by a narrow passage with the Palace gardens.

Too late! A mass of screaming eunuchs and tire-women blocked the narrow corridor, and neither the Queen nor Nehushta had been able to force their way through it when the soldiers burst into the room.

Orpah recognized her rival instantly. Her eyes were blazing with the fire of a madness which multiplied her strength tenfold, and a bloodstained froth dribbled from her lips. She drew a dagger from her garments, and, scattering the women who had surrounded their mistress as if they were children, she plunged it into Queen Abijah's breast.

Had not the Assyrian officer who was in command dragged the madwoman away and thrown her to the ground, Nehushta, like her grandmother, would have fallen a victim to Orpah's murderous fury. But the cynical Bel-shar-utsur, who had been campaigning for ten years, was accustomed to snatch his joys where he found them, even among scenes of death and carnage. His passions became suddenly inflamed by the sight of the terrified young girl's beauty and he resolved to save her life and claim her as his share of the booty.

Seeing, therefore, that there was little likelihood of being able to accomplish the task entrusted to him by Sabdai, since the King was nowhere to be found, he gave the order for an immediate retreat, for he was

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only a rough soldier and not overfond of this street and house fighting, and he was anxious to make a junction with his comrades who had gone into the Temple. As for Shebna, trembling with fear and irresolute, the Vizier would have followed the Assyrians, but Bel-shar-utsur pushed him aside with a coarse laugh.

“Look to thyself, Vizier; we have men’s work before us!”

The soldiers, dragging Nehushta in their midst, in spite of her vain cries for help and of her feeble attempts at resistance, streamed out through the wrecked and corpse-strewn apartments. But no sooner had they reached the court of the Palace than they saw that something had evidently gone very much amiss with their comrades. To the north, opposite the Gate of the Couriers, lay the Gate of the Guards, through which Bel-shar-utsur intended to rejoin Sabdai and his men in the Temple precincts. And through this very gate, less than two hundred feet away, came rushing the *Gibborim* and the Carians, shouting triumphantly because of their slaughter of the Assyrians by the great altar.

Bel-shar-utsur’s decision was instantaneous. He wheeled his men sharply to the right and made at a run for the Gate of the Couriers, intending to return to Bela’s house to meet the further reinforcements which, he felt sure, would by now be on their way. And, as a matter of fact, no sooner had they passed through the now deserted gate than they saw another body of Assyrians advancing through the southern gate of the royal enclosure.

“By Ashur!” cried Bel-shar-utsur to the leader of the new forces, “thou hast come in the nick of

time, comrade, for there are too many whelps in this lion's den for my liking ! ”

“ Yet thou seemest to have stolen a comely enough she-cub, Bel-shar-utsur,” replied the officer laughingly, pointing at the half-conscious form of the Princess, who was supported by two soldiers.

There were about three hundred of the new-comers and there was barely time for the exchange of a dozen words before the *Gibborim* and the Carians, pouring out of the Gate of the Couriers, attacked them. And at this crisis the superior military discipline and science of the Assyrians stood them in good stead. They were in such a position that behind them lay the angle formed by the southern wall of the royal enclosure and a part of the eastern city wall, with the Horse Gate some three hundred feet away. Luckily for them, a terrific assault was being delivered on this part of the city wall, an assault which absorbed all the attention of the defenders on the wall itself and on the neighbouring towers. Rapidly Bel-shar-utsur formed his four hundred men into a wedge-shaped mass, placing Nehushta in the midst of it, under the protection of two soldiers who covered her with their shields.

As he expected that in a very short time either further reinforcements would arrive from Bela's house, or else that the Assyrians who had rushed down to attack the defenders of the Fountain Gate in the rear would succeed in carrying the gate and letting the main body of the invaders into the city, Bel-shar-utsur decided that his best plan would be to endeavour to hold the *Gibborim* and the Carians who faced him, for a time. For several minutes the fight swayed to and fro at close quarters, and then a shout of

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triumph went up from the Hebrews, mingled with a cry of dismay from the Assyrians.

Through the gate of the royal enclosure on their left, instead of the expected Assyrian reinforcements, there came great numbers of Hebrew warriors and yelling Arabs, headed by the gigantic form of the Prince Amon.

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When the Prince, flying from Bela's house, reached the Fountain Gate, he explained hurriedly what had happened, but as a strong attack was being delivered at this point, only a handful of soldiers could be spared, and he was obliged to proceed further along the wall before he was able to collect altogether some three hundred men, Hebrews and faithful Arabs of the B'ne-Jeruel, at the head of which he rushed back towards the Pool of Siloam.

Along the western side of this pool there was a great stairway, cut in the rock. The wall of the pool itself served as its parapet on the east, while on the west it abutted on another wall, running partly up the side of the Valley of Craftsmen, between the Upper City and Ophel. It was on this stairway that Amon fought the great fight which saved the Holy City from the consequences of the Vizier Shebna's treacherous plot. For had the Assyrians been able to reach the Fountain Gate, so as to attack its defenders in the rear, there is little doubt that they would have enabled the main body of the besiegers to enter the city, for it was here that the *Tartan* Nabuna'id had launched his chief attack. The other attacks, at various points around the city, were so many feints, destined to occupy the attention of as many of the defenders as possible.

The memory of the terrible encounter which saved the throne of the B'ne-David lived for many years afterwards in men's minds, and it became a saying among the people, when any man achieved some great deed of valour, to say of him : "He fought like Amon at the stairway."

The Prince and his men, coming out of a narrow side street, met the first Assyrians on the broad pavement at the bottom of the stairway. Step by step the Assyrians were pushed back and up the great broad steps. Now and then two adversaries would meet in fight to the death against the overhanging parapet and the victor, sometimes a Hebrew or an Arab, sometimes an Assyrian, would throw the body of his victim over into the pool, to fall, sometimes while still living, with a loud splash into the water, which became speedily tinged with red. Inclined at first to despise their foes, the Assyrians soon became filled with a superstitious dread at the ravages caused within their ranks by the colossal figure of the Prince. Looming above them, with the rage of battle in his face and his eyes flashing fire, he seemed to the Assyrians like the God Nergal. His sword, sweeping to the right and to the left, drank the lives of men thirstily, until the stairway was heaped with corpses and slippery with blood, and when the Hebrews at last reached the top, there could not have been more than fifty of the Assyrians left.

Turning swiftly, they ran helter-skelter up the hill towards Bela's house. From every dwelling along the narrow streets men armed with sticks, daggers and stones, joined in the pursuit, and as the fugitives came in sight of the abode of the Edomite, Amon's heart suddenly sank, for further up the street, rapidly

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moving towards the Palace, he saw another body of Assyrians, who had evidently entered the city through the underground passages.

Not a moment was to be lost if this terrible gaping fissure in the side of Jerusalem were to be closed to the savage foes who were striving to deliver a deadly blow at the very heart of the Holy City. The fleeing enemy rushed into the open gateway of the house, and in the court another great fight took place. Some twenty of the Assyrians managed to escape and fled down the steps leading to the underground passages, pursued by the Hebrews. In the little chamber off the court Amon, urging his men to continue the pursuit, could not forbear to pause reverently for an instant by the side of the luckless Zibiah, who still lay there with the gaping wound in her side. Tenderly he drew the body of the little *Kedeshah*, who had given her life for his, to one side and covered it with a cloak taken from one of the soldiers, intending to return later to see that she was given decent burial.

And then he followed hard on the footsteps of his soldiers. Ten men left on guard over the mouth of the shaft connecting the passage with the underground tunnel would be sufficient to stop a whole army, and it was Amon's intention thus to leave a few of his men until proper arrangements could be made to block up the shaft and the passages. The Assyrians who had been left on guard, seized with a blind panic when they saw their comrades come rushing down the passage, joined in the stampede and soon they were all struggling madly to escape through the narrow conduit leading out of the vaulted chamber, in which many were cut down. Some managed to get as far as the edge of the shaft, where the gallery widened

and grew higher, and a few were even able to climb down the ladders which had been left in position. A confused noise of shouting came up from below, and Amon knew that had it not been for their success still further reinforcements would now be pouring forth from Bela's house. A sudden horrible dread assailed him as he remembered the vision of the Assyrians racing northwards to the Palace. He wondered how many had preceded them and what the savage murderers might have done in their blind fury.

Amid the shouting beneath him he fancied he heard the Edomite's shrill and screaming tones, appealing for help, when suddenly a noise as of a strong, rushing wind filled the shaft and the gallery, and shouts and screams of terror broke out above the noise of angry, swirling waters.

The Hand of Jahveh had once more been stretched forth to help His afflicted people in their hour of need. As had happened occasionally in the past, at intervals of many years, the Spring Gihon, unaccountably changing the period of its flow, had suddenly burst forth like a torrent, some three hours before its time. It invaded the galleries and rose almost to the top of the shaft, effectually cutting off, with its all-embracing flood, the Assyrians who were at that moment in the galleries, and drowning them like noxious vermin.

Leaving a guard over the mouth of the shaft, Amon hastened, with the hundred and fifty men that were still left to him, to the royal enclosure. His heart beat with an emotion that the fighting had been unable to rouse when he saw the dead guards lying in the gate.

When Bel-shar-utsur saw the Hebrews he realized

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that only a miracle or some extraordinary piece of luck could save him and his men, and a daring idea, which he instantly proceeded to put into execution, came into his mind. He would boldly endeavour to profit by the general confusion of the outside attack and fight his way out of the city through the Horse Gate, close on their right.

It was like fighting a rearguard battle and a vanguard one simultaneously. While a part of the Assyrians held the Hebrews at bay the rest, led by Bel-shar-utsur, fought their way to the Horse Gate through the foes who endeavoured to surround them, attacked the guards in the rear, killed them all and managed to get the heavy gate open. Though Bel-shar-utsur himself was killed early in the fight, about a hundred of the Assyrians got out alive, taking Nehushta with them, and when their comrades outside, who were engaged in an attack with scaling-ladders because they thought the gate itself impregnable, tried to force their way in, the mass of Hebrews quickly put them to flight and managed to close the gates again.

But in those few agonizing moments Amon, fighting like a very God, with faithful Shaftan by his side, caught a glimpse of a half-unconscious, white-clad form which he recognized instantly. A great shout burst from his lips.

“Nehushta, I am coming !”

At the sound of his mighty voice he could see her revive and struggle wildly for an instant to escape from the grasp of the soldiers who held her, but alas ! in vain.

Miraculously preserved from any hurt amid the carnage and the flying arrows, she was being carried further and further from him through the gates.

Amon cut a swathe through the intrushing Assyrians, but he could not get near her and had to retreat to avoid being left outside when the gates were closed again.

His pain-maddened fancy pictured the Assyrian soldiers carrying Nehushta along the sloping pathway which ran down into the Valley of the Kidron, to a fate perchance a thousand times worse than the one he had saved her from.

And he was powerless !

CHAPTER XVII

THROUGHOUT the eventful Sabbath dawn which witnessed the failure of Shebna's attempt to betray Jerusalem into the hands of the Assyrians, the old hag Meshullemeth lay hidden and trembling in one of the upper rooms at the back of the court, where she usually slept. Awakened by the noise of Amon's escape, she had crept out on the balcony in time to see the outward rush of the first contingent of Assyrians, accompanied by Bela. A little later, when the Edomite returned to seek reinforcements, she had hobbled down into the court, frightened by his outcries when he discovered the dead body of Zibiah in the little store chamber, and, although she had not dared to show it, she felt a secret satisfaction because she had hated the little *Kedeshah*. When the second contingent of three hundred Assyrians went forth, mostly to meet their death, she hid herself in the audience-chamber at the back of the court, whence she finally witnessed the return of the remnant of the fleeing invaders, pursued by Amon and the *Gibborim*. But Bela, her son, she had seen no more. She had learnt of his probable fate from the casual words of the *Gibborim* which she overheard, and her heart was wrung with sorrow, for she loved the misshapen monster as much as if he had been handsome and straight-limbed.

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The house itself was, of course, thoroughly searched, and Bela's slaves, being mostly foreigners, were all killed, while the few girls found in his harem were apportioned among the *Gibborim*. But the Hebrews, taking Meshullemeth for some old and half-demented slave, a part she could play to perfection, spared her life and allowed her for the time being to stay in the house to attend to the wants of the fifteen or twenty men who were left to guard the vaulted chamber and the underground passages. The gateway into the street was left open, so that help might be swiftly procured in case the Assyrians should be rash enough to attempt another attack along the same route, since the water might subside at any moment.

That night Meshullemeth woke with a start. By the dim light of the lamp which burnt in a corner of the room she saw a man leaning over her couch. He was dressed as an Arab and his face was almost entirely veiled. He was panting as if he had been running, and as soon as he spoke, she knew that the voice was that of the Vizier Shebna.

"Come, thou old hag!" he whispered, shaking her roughly, "thy lying prophecies have come to naught, and thou must help me to get up on the wall among the Arabs who are friendly to me!" The old woman got up swiftly, and followed him out on the balcony.

"Lord, if my prophecies have come to naught," she said, "blame me not! Hadst thou not helped my son to get that accursed woman back, he would not now be lying drowned beneath this house!"

With an exclamation of surprise Shebna, still speaking in whispers, bade the old woman explain what she meant, and in a few words she gave him an account of what she knew and of how she surmised

that Zibiah must have escaped and set Amon free, being herself probably killed during his escape and bringing about the failure of the whole plot. Shebna felt tempted to tell the old hag that had it not been for her son's insane desire to satisfy his private grudge against the Prince by torturing him, instead of killing him while he had him in his power, more probably still the plot would not have failed. But he reflected bitterly that recriminations would be useless ; besides which he was anxious to get out of the city as quickly as possible.

He had hidden himself that morning in the Palace gardens, had eventually escaped into the city and fled to his own house, where a trusted slave had helped him, towards evening, to disguise himself as one of the B'ne-Jeruel, with features almost hidden by the folds of his head cloth. He had wandered about the whole day in deadly fear of being discovered, and finally he had bethought himself that if he could only get to Bela's house he might, by the help of the friendly Arabs whom he had so heavily bribed, escape over the wall to the Assyrians. Once among them, even although he dreaded to face the *Tartan*, he had information to impart which he thought would be welcome to the general.

For he had witnessed the capture of Nehushta by Bel-shar-utsur and he felt certain that the Assyrians had no knowledge of the importance of their captive, since, like every one else, they thought the Princess Nehushta already safe in their hands. It was evident, therefore, that Bel-shar-utsur had taken her merely because she was a beautiful girl. The Vizier was also aware that, although the plot had failed, some of the Assyrians had been successful in escaping from the

city, taking their beautiful captive with them. For on all hands during that day he had heard, as he walked furtively through the bazaars, men discussing the strange and romantic story of the Princess Nehushta's return, a story which had by now spread over the whole city, and of her capture by the Assyrians.

He would go straight to the *Rab-shakeh*, explain how the plot had failed through no fault of his, and at the same time reveal to him the way in which the Great King had been tricked, and how the fortunes of war had brought the Princess Nehushta herself, this time, into the power of the Assyrians. Surely the Great King's anger against Judah would be increased a hundredfold because of the shameful deception of which he had been the victim, and he would not rest until Jerusalem lay in ruins. And perhaps, after all, the old hag's prophecies would come true, for the Great King would surely reward the man who had revealed the truth to him. In his inmost heart, however, Shebna quailed at the thought of having to face the *Tartan*, to whom he had made the rash promise concerning the King of Judah's death; but there was no other course open to him.

A little later, helped by the friendly Arabs, to whom he gave some of the gold with which he had taken the precaution to load himself when he left his house, the Vizier found himself at the foot of the wall. As he climbed down the rugged pathway to the bed of the valley, he could see the fires lit by the sentinels who still kept watch round the Spring Gihon. He crossed over the rocky bed of the Kidron, down which a stream of water, the overflow from the spring, was trickling, and descended the valley slowly towards the spring of En-rogel. At the farther end of the King's

Gardens, which stretched from the Fountain Gate to En-rogel, there were Assyrian outposts and the sentinels seeing, as they thought, an Arab before them, again came within an ace of killing the Vizier without further ado. But the quickness with which he showed them the *Rab-shakeh's* ring once more saved his life, and he asked to be taken to the general's tent.

On their way through the various outposts and rows of tents to the commander's quarters, Shebna's fears became more and more intense. Some horrible presentiment grew stronger within him every moment and turned his bones to water.

Bel-natsir and the *Tartan* Nabuna'id had sat far into the night in the *Rab-shakeh's* tent, discussing the failure of the surprise attack, and engaged, with the help of their scribes, in drawing up the best report they could for the Great King's perusal. For, even in cases where he had delegated almost supreme authority to a commander of high rank, Sennacherib's conceited and tyrannical disposition caused him to interfere continually in all military matters, of which he considered that his knowledge was unsurpassed. Not even a soldier of Nabuna'id's great experience would have dared to let an incident such as the failure of the surprise attack on Jerusalem pass without immediately apprising the Great King of all its details.

Dannai, the only Assyrian officer who had succeeded in getting out of Jerusalem alive, had reported all the circumstances to the *Tartan*, not forgetting the hereliction of duty which Sabdai, the officer who led the first contingent of Assyrians, had been guilty of. The *Tartan* was highly incensed at the disobedience of his orders, which he considered as one of the principal causes of the failure of the attack. Dannai had also

told him of the murder of the Queen-Mother by a madwoman, and how Bel-shar-utsur had captured one of her attendants, and, as Bel-shar-utsur had been killed, the *Tartan*, after seeing the girl, gave orders that she should be given a small tent by herself. He would send her as a present to his colleague, the *Tartan* Ashur-killani, who appreciated such gifts. He himself, grown old and grey in warfare, had lost all taste for women.

"A bad business, friend Nabuna'id," said the *Rab-shakeh*.

"Aye, and it is as well for Sabdai that he did not survive his disobedience," rejoined the *Tartan* grimly, "else should he have been put to death on the instant of his return to camp!"

"Four or five hundred of our best men gone, and those Hebrew dogs more on their guard than ever! Almost I could wish that I had not listened to that treacherous son of a slave, Shebna!"

"A dangerous man, Bel-natsir! Did you mark how high his ambition flew, when we saw him here a few nights ago?"

A sardonic smile spread slowly over the *Rab-shakeh's* features.

"Ambition is one thing and attainment is another, O *Tartan*! Had the plot succeeded, I think it is probable that some mischance would have befallen the Vizier Shebna. As it is, I expect that by now the master he would have betrayed has put it beyond his power to do so again. Were he in my power, I should soon put a fitting end to his ambitions!"

These last words were hardly out of the *Rab-shakeh's* mouth when the tent curtain was lifted and a few soldiers introduced the trembling Vizier himself.

Shebna tore off the fold of the head cloth which covered his face as he entered the tent, and, holding the *Rab-shakeh's* ring in his outstretched hand, he sank on his knees and touched the ground thrice with his forehead. At a sign from Bel-natsir the soldiers raised him up. In the flickering light of the torches, which turned the light of the little lamps in the tent into a sickly yellow glare, the Vizier's face took on a dirty grey hue. His eyes roved ceaselessly from the face of the *Rab-shakeh* to that of the *Tartan*, as if he sought to divine their thoughts, and his bloated features twitched with fear, a fear that threatened to degenerate into blind, shrieking terror when he beheld the cold, stern features of the men to whom he had thought it would be so easy to explain his failure.

"Lord," he began, addressing himself more especially to the *Rab-shakeh*, "'tis not my fault if all went not as had been agreed——"

"Whose fault was it then?" interrupted the Assyrian coldly.

For a moment Shebna felt as if gigantic hands were choking him and pressing on his brain, so that the words refused to flow forth from his parched mouth. But at last he began to speak rapidly and almost incoherently. He blamed the Assyrians for not having sent enough men, he complained of Sabdai's mistake in dividing his forces, he swore that if he had had enough men he could have led them to the Temple where Hezekiah was probably hidden. And then a wave of terror surged over his whole being as he realized that the Assyrian generals were no longer listening to him, and that the soldiers, at a sign from Nabu-na'id, were striving to drag him away.

He made desperate efforts to struggle out of their grasp and went on speaking in great, gasping shouts.

"Mercy, O Lord!—I have great news for the King of the World!—the Princess Nehushta—the Princess Nehushta is here!—in the camp!—I swear it!—I can explain all! Let me go——"

Half-unconsciously the soldiers had halted in their slow progress towards the door of the long tent, but suddenly the old *Tartan* rose up, half drawing his sword, and shouted with rage at them.

"Dogs, have you not heard me? Take him away!" and he made a gesture the meaning of which could not be misinterpreted.

The greatness of his terror gave the Vizier almost superhuman strength. At the very door of the tent, with a sudden movement, he tore himself free and rushed back to where the generals sat.

"See, I have gold! much gold!" he screamed, plunging his hands into his garments and scattering showers of the precious metal around him. "I will give you all—all—for my life!"

The soldiers dragged him out, while the *Rab-shakeh*, with an ironical smile, bade his orderly pick up the gold pieces and place them in a leathern pouch which hung in a corner of the tent.

The half-fainting Shebna was dragged through the sleeping camp towards that part of the hill which overhung the Valley of Hinnom. Here and there his screams of terror drew half-awakened soldiers to the doors of the long, serried rows of tents.

Close to the very brow of the hill, the soldiers shouted and shook their torches, throwing off thousands of golden sparks into the air. Disturbed by the sudden flare of light, which revealed a row of

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tall stakes facing the southern wall of the Holy City, a number of black shapes rose from their foul meal into the heavens with a heavy flapping of wings. From behind a tent some of the soldiers dragged forward a long, pointed stake.

“He who was on high hath been made low, and shall be raised on high yet once again!”

The Vizier Shebna understood at last the true meaning of the prophecy of Meshullemeth, the mother of Bela the Edomite!

* * * * *

On the other side of the Valley of Hinnom the lugubrious and long-drawn wail of the mourning-women ascended from the whole of Jerusalem. Not only in the royal courts, but throughout the city they keened for slaves, for freed men, for soldiers, for priests, and for a Queen who lay dead in her Palace.

Once more the King of Judah, clad in sackcloth, sat on the ground in the apartments of his wife, the Queen Hephzi-bah, and scattered ashes on his head, while he prayed to Jahveh for strength to bear his trials. His mother lay murdered because of the sin of his father. His daughter, the hope of his race, was gone for ever, worse than dead. The Prince Amon, who had fought so bravely for the B'ne-David, lay on a bed of sickness at the point of death, and by his side sat Shaftan, listening with sorrowful heart to the ravings of the fever into which he had been thrown by the loss of Nehushta and by his unhealed wounds.

Jahveh had given and Jahveh had taken away!

The King wished fervently that his daughter at least might have been spared to him, but his heart was filled with gratitude, nevertheless, because the Assyrians' attempt had come to naught. None of

their attacks on the gates had been successful; every Assyrian who had penetrated into Jerusalem had been either killed, made a prisoner, or drowned in the underground passages, and the Holy City and the Temple were still inviolate within their mighty ramparts.

But when he allowed his mind to dwell on the treacherous dog who had betrayed him, and on the murderess whom he had weakly allowed to live after her attempt on his daughter's life, Hezekiah's anger burnt like a flame within him. Standing horror-stricken on the steps of the sanctuary, he had witnessed the slaughter of the sacrilegious Assyrians who had entered the precincts of the Temple, and had rushed back to the Palace, where the tragedy of his mother's death and his daughter's disappearance awaited him. In the moments that followed the final repulse of the Assyrians dozens of slaves and officials had flocked round him and Amon, with tales of Shebna's treachery and of the murderous fury of Orpah, and there and then the King had sworn by Jahveh that the traitor should be slaughtered at dawn in sight of his Assyrian accomplices, and that the Queen Orpah should be stoned to death at the gates, as became a murderess.

Unfortunately, however, it seemed as if the Vizier, at any rate, would elude the punishment he so richly deserved, for he had disappeared. Some of the tire-women and eunuchs who were in the Queen-Mother's apartments were closely questioned, but they could say nothing much. One or two seemed to remember vaguely that, after the murder of the Queen and the departure of the Assyrians, Shebna had escaped into the Palace gardens, but when these were searched no traces of him could be found.

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As for Orpah, something seemed to have snapped within her brain at the moment when she plunged her dagger into Queen Abijah's breast. Stunned by the force with which Bel-shar-utsur had thrown her to the ground, when she recovered consciousness she had not only forgotten where she was, but appeared to have no recollection of what she had done. The slaves and eunuchs dared not come near her for fear of her madness, and they had allowed her to wander back to her own house, where she was closely guarded by some of the Carians. Two days later, after they had buried the King's mother in the royal sepulchres in the City of David, Orpah was brought before the King, with whom there sat the Holy Prophet Isaiah, so that she might be judged.

She hugged to her bosom the wretched wooden doll which was her constant companion, and which she called "Little Mesha." The soldiers had tried to tear it from her, but she had turned on them like a lioness, so they had allowed her to retain it. When the Carians forced her to kneel before the King, although she still took him for King Ahaz, her husband, there was no flame of hatred in her eyes, nor any anger in her speech. Thirty-five years of her life, thirty-five years of misery, of alternate sanity and madness, had been wiped from her brain as utterly as if they had never been.

There was something terrible and grotesque in the artless talk of a young girl, pouring forth in cracked tones from her withered lips. She babbled of the day when she came to Jerusalem from her father's palace at Kir of Moab, accompanied by her maidens and many warriors and bringing as her dowry thousands of sheep and cattle. Then she fancied herself once

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more in the Queen's chamber, where Ahaz had come to see her, with due ceremony, after the thirty days of purification required because she had borne a son. And her words caused great misery within the soul of King Hezekiah, because of the sins of his father, King Ahaz.

"Thou may'st not have this woman stoned to death, O King," said the Holy Prophet when the King was about to pass sentence on her, "for Jahveh hath stricken her sorely."

"Nay, O Holy Prophet," answered the King, the memory of his mother's death rising once more uppermost in his mind, "but she shall surely die, for she is a murderess!"

"Then let her not die by thy hand, O King, for of a truth she was thy father's wife and bore him a son."

The King remained deep in thought for some moments.

"Let her be driven forth from Jerusalem," he said. "I will not have the blood of my mother crying out for vengeance to me, neither will I have Jahveh's dwelling-place polluted by the blood of the unavenged. Take thou this woman, Angorash," he continued, speaking to one of the Carian officers, "and lead her to the Horse Gate, even to the gate where they slew Athaliah the Sidonian, because she shed the blood of my fathers, and drive her forth from this Holy City."

That night, when the soldiers took her from the House of Pharaoh's Daughter, she did not resist, for they forbore to take the doll away from her. They put a loaf of bread and a leather bottle of water in a cloth and bound it upon her back. Four priests accompanied the soldiers. At the very gate itself,

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they slew a bull and sprinkled the lintels of the doors and the threshold of the gate with its blood, while one of the priests said in a loud voice : " O Jahveh, Lord of heaven and of the earth, accept the blood of this bull for the blood of Orpah, and let it be an atonement of her sin for the blood which she has shed ! "

As the postern in the gate closed behind her, a great peace descended upon Orpah. She felt as if an iron band that encircled her head were suddenly removed. The night was dark and the thin crescent of the moon had barely risen, and as she wandered slowly down the path, crooning to the doll in her arms, she became aware of many points of light around and above her. She thought she was in the Garden of Uzziah, where, on hot summer nights, she had often wandered with her maidens when little Mesha had been restless because of the heat and could not sleep. The lights, she thought, were doubtless the torches of revellers on the roofs of the Upper City, which could easily be seen through the trees in the garden. Slowly she wandered on until of a sudden the gentle murmur of running water struck upon her ears.

The swift overflow of the Spring Gihon had continued to such an extent that a portion of the water, running out through the opening made in the covering masonry by the Assyrians, flowed down the valley of the Kidron, as happened sometimes after the heavy winter rains, and lost itself in the King's gardens lower down. The murmur of the water, acting on Orpah's disordered fancy, caused her to believe that she was in the gardens of her father's summer palace, on the cliff-like banks of Arnon of Moab, where the murmur of ever-flowing water filled the mind with coolness and delight. She saw herself

again, surrounded by her maidens, at the great festival of the sheep-shearing, when the young men and maidens danced by the little streams far into the night, and a great longing came upon her for the smooth, upland pastures of Moab, where the young lambs frisked in the spring to the sound of the shepherds' pipes, and every breeze was laden with the perfume of the wild thyme. She bent down and dabbled her hand in the cool water, thinking, as she did so, that it were better to hurry on, for the night was far advanced and the King her father would be anxious. She called to her maidens, but no answer came, and suddenly she remembered.

She was no longer a Princess of Moab. She was a wife, and had borne a son to her husband, the King of Judah. These were indeed the Palace gardens in Jerusalem and she must hasten back. With sudden fear she realized that she could not find her way. As she continued to descend the gentle slope, she came to a wide place where the light of the myriad stars and of the moon revealed to her the towering south-west wall of Jerusalem on her right hand. And suddenly she heard a loud voice crying in the air beside her—

“O Orpah, Daughter of Mesha! I am Chemosh, the God of thy fathers! I am Chemosh who wasted Israel at Kir Hareseth, and I have brought thee to the place where the B'ne-David burnt thy son with fire!”

A great sob shook her as she plunged her hand into her bosom and drew forth the little amulet which never left her. On the night of that terrible sacrifice thirty-five years before, she had escaped from the Palace and found her way to the Tophet, to the Pit of Horror, which lay cold and deserted. There

grubbing like an animal among the ashes, she had found a small bone, which she had ever since worn around her neck. Like an overwhelming flood dead memories rushed upon her, and scalding tears coursed down her withered cheeks.

This was not Moab, neither was it the Garden of Uzziah! That morning, that very morning, they had sacrificed her child! Ahaz, her husband, had stood by unmoved and forced her to witness the priests kill her child because he loved another woman! And lo, there in front of her, belching smoke and flame, raged the fire in which they had burnt her little one's tender limbs! Shadows of men, doubtless the priests finishing their accursed work, moved about in front of it. Suddenly a great cry of wonder broke from her lips.

The fire had flared up suddenly and out of it, surrounded by a white light, and coming towards her with outstretched arms and uncertain steps was little Mesha—her little Mesha, saved by Great Chemosh from the cruel, all-devouring flames! What, then, was this wretched doll which she hugged in her arms? She threw it away with a gesture of disgust, for there, coming towards her, was her own son, the flesh of her flesh! With a cry of gladness, Orpah ran towards the fire.

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A little way above En-rogel, at the point where the valleys of the Kidron and of Hinnom meet and widen out, there was an Assyrian outpost. Round the fire, half a dozen jesting soldiers were about to kill a lamb, intending to roast its flesh for their evening meal. At a coarse jest of one of them, the soldier who held it, bursting into laughter, allowed it to escape, and with a bound the little animal sprang forward into

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the darkness. With loud shouts the soldiers ran after it, and one of them threw his short javelin with great strength at the elusive white shadow.

* * * * *

A woman's piercing shriek rose into the night air. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

NEHUSHTA was imprisoned for some hours in one of the little houses of the village of Siloam, which lay on the slope of the Mount of Olives, facing Jerusalem. All its inhabitants had, of course, long since sought shelter within the walls of the Holy City, and Assyrian soldiers were quartered in its miserable hovels. The fear and terror inspired by the savage fighting in the midst of which she found herself, together with the tragedy of her grandmother's death, had nearly unhinged the Princess's mind, and she lay for a time in a kind of stupor.

Soon after Dannai had made his report to the *Tartan*, the latter ordered the captive girl to be brought before him, and her wonderful beauty struck the general so much that he decided, as has been seen, to send her as a gift to his colleague. The thick masses of her black hair, which had come unbound, flowed loosely over her bare shoulders, for in the heat of the fighting and of her struggles to escape her garments had been nearly torn from her. Her luminous eyes, filled with terror and wonder, and the beautiful lines of her form, as she stood silently before Nabuna'id, made the old *Tartan* regret that the hot blood of youth no longer coursed through his veins.

He questioned her closely as to her name and condition, suspecting that she might be some maiden of

high degree, but she obstinately refused to say anything, except that her name was Miriam. At first she had a wild kind of idea that if she revealed herself the Assyrians, ever greedy for gold, might offer to take a heavy ransom for her, but she was restrained by the thought of the terrible vengeance that the discovery of her father's deception might bring on his head. Seeing that no information could be obtained from her, the *Tartan* gave orders that a small tent near his quarters should be assigned to her, and that she should be sent to the *Tartan* Ashur-killani on the following day.

It would be hard to describe Nehushta's state of mind. In those terrible moments when she was being borne through the gate she had heard her name shouted by Amon's voice; she had seen him fighting like one of the Children of Anak to win towards her; she had felt the joy of knowing that, as the Holy Prophet had surmised, he was not killed but had probably been in hiding for some deep purpose of his own, and lo, at the very moment of his return, Jahveh had dashed the cup of happiness from their lips, and nothing but the blackness of death lay before her. For she understood clearly the utter hopelessness of her position this time. No amount of courage or cunning on Amon's part would avail to pluck her forth from the very midst of the Assyrian forces; and as for escape, it was not even to be dreamt of. And yet—and yet—she could not altogether rid herself of an unquenchable hope that at the last hour Jahveh might extend His protecting hand over her. And to that end she prayed fervently.

If her prayers remained unheard, she would console herself with the thought that Amon still lived, though

she was destined never to lie in his arms or to bear him children, and that the safety of Jerusalem and of Jahveh's Holy Temple would bring joy to her father's heart, in spite of the grief he must feel at losing her. And what matter, after all, if she were sacrificed in one way rather than in another, so long as Amon lived, and the King, her father, was made joyful in his faith? For the decision she had taken when she thought she was to be sent to Sennacherib still swayed her mind. If the small, unquenchable hope within her were destined to die out altogether, no man should ever possess her. She drew from her garments a small dagger, a weapon which never quitted her, and gazed mistily through her tears at its fine, gold-inlaid blade.

According to custom the *Tartan's* report to the Great King was sent in duplicate by mounted couriers, who left the camp at a few hours' interval, and the following day Nehushta was sent down to Libnah. She had been curtly told that she would be honoured by being sent as a gift to the *Tartan* Ashur-killani, instead of being given as a slave or wife to some soldier or inferior officer, and were it not for the spark of hope within her that would not be killed she would have anticipated the inevitable moment when she would plunge the dagger into her breast.

Towards evening on the second day, as the red globe of the sun was sinking into the Great Sea, they came in sight of the high, white-fronted cliffs on which rose the walls of Libnah. The Great King was having as much trouble in besieging this enormously strong position, which commanded the Vale of Elah, as he had had with the siege of Lachish. Only when it fell would he be able to concentrate the whole of his forces either against Jerusalem or against the army

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which lay at Zalu, on the borders of Egypt. It is true that to the north two other cities, Ekron and Timnath, were still holding out, but once Libnah fell he did not think it would take long to reduce them.

Nehushta's heart was heavy within her as they entered the Assyrian camp, which was merely surrounded by a wide ditch, the whole of the country around Libnah being clear of the enemy. But, as she was soon to discover, the protection of Jahveh had not as yet been entirely withdrawn from the daughter of the B'ne-David. She was to be granted a further respite, and the sentence of death which she had, as it were, passed upon herself, was to be again suspended for a time. For although the man whom Nabuna'id had thought to please by sending him Nehushta as a gift loved women inordinately, his harem being the largest in Nineveh after the King's, there was that in him which was like to prove the salvation of Nehushta.

The *Tartan* Ashur-killani was a man of about thirty-five years of age, of absolutely pure Assyrian race for many generations back, and belonging to a family that prided itself on its frequent intermarriages with princesses of the reigning dynasty. For this reason he was an especial favourite of the Great King and had risen comparatively early to the highest dignity in the kingdom, that of *Tartan* of the Right, entitled to stand on the King's right hand in Nineveh, and to take supreme command, under the King, of all field and siege operations. His harem, as has been said, was filled with women of every colour and race, hailing from all parts of the vast Assyrian dominions. Ashur-killani, however, was subject to sudden fits of

passion for one particular woman, during which his harem knew him not. At such times he would take the latest favourite and instal her in a house or palace of her own, filled with costly furniture, and spend every moment of his available time with her, absolutely refusing to bestow his favours on any other woman. And these fits of passion were as likely to come upon him during a campaign as when in Nineveh.

As it happened, at the very beginning of the Palestinian expedition, when a number of petty princes submitted to the Great King at Ushu, one of them, the *Seren* or Lord of Ashdod, brought a beautiful daughter as a present for Sennacherib. No sooner had Ashur-killani set eyes on her, as she knelt unveiled before the King, than he became violently enamoured of her, and Sennacherib, noticing his favourite general's desire, laughingly bestowed the young Philistine princess upon him. Ever since Ashur-killani, outside his military duties, had had no single thought for any other woman.

When, therefore, immediately after her arrival, Dannai led Nehushta to his tent and delivered Nabuna'id's message the enamoured Ashur-killani, who scarcely bestowed a passing glance on the young girl, was greatly embarrassed, and at first did not know what to do, since to refuse such a gift would give great offence to his colleague. Evening had fallen, and the tent was lighted by several little lamps suspended from the cross-poles. It was evident that the *Tartan* had just risen from the side of a woman who lay stretched on a heap of embroidered cushions at the back of the tent, while two black slaves served her with food and drink. A very few moments, however, were sufficient for him to arrive at a decision.

For the Great King had not sent the supposed Princess Nehushta back to Assyria, to serve as a *Kedeshah* in the Temple of Ishtar at Erech, as he had threatened to do in order to humble the King of Judah's pride. Perhaps the gentleness and resignation, as well as the beauty of Neziach, the little *Kedeshah* who had so willingly sacrificed herself to save the daughter of the B'ne-David, had touched some secret chord in the heart of the King of the World. At any rate he had caused a tent to be erected for her within the royal enclosure, and often, at night, obsequious eunuchs would lead her, with due ceremony, to the royal tent. Ashur-killani, therefore, bethought himself now that a way out of his difficulty would be to accept the gift which had been sent him gratefully and at once to present the young girl to the Great King's new favourite, so that she might serve her and gladden her heart with the sound of her native tongue.

"I will order my scribes to send a message of thanks to the *Tartan* Nabuna'id," he said to Dannai. "As for this maiden, I require her not at present. Take her now to the tent of the Princess Nehushta of Judah to serve her and to gladden her heart with the sound of her own tongue. Say to the Princess that she is a gift from the *Tartan* Ashur-killani, in homage to his Lord, the King of the World."

Nehushta's heart almost stood still with joy when she heard these words, with their promise of, at any rate temporary, respite from the fate which she dreaded above all things; and, although she could not help starting slightly at the mention of her name, she very soon realized that the little *Kedeshah* Neziach, who had taken her place, must surely have become a favourite of the Great King and that she was destined to

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become her attendant. Nehushta felt that her prayers had not been in vain, and that Jahveh still watched over the seed of the B'ne-David.

As they passed through the huge camp sorrow darkened her spirit, because of the great number of the soldiers of Ashur, the perfection of their equipment, and the hundreds of horses, camels, mules, and war-chariots which they possessed. How could Jerusalem ever hope to resist if, in the future, the Great King arrayed his entire forces against the Holy City? A thrill of fear, too, ran through her veins when she saw the royal pavilion, with the standards of Ashur, borne aloft on poles of cypress wood plated with gold, in front of it. There dwelt the Great King, the Beloved of the Mighty God Ashur, the cruel conqueror who had laid so many lands waste and slain and tortured her countrymen in thousands.

There appeared to be a great stir in the camp. Outside the royal pavilion stood three smoking horses, held by soldiers, while a double stream of officers, eunuchs, scribes and other officials passed in and out of the door, at which two lancers stood on guard. They wore helmets and full armour, their lances were couched, and they were mounted on great horses covered with armour of thick cloth. Dannai stopped one of the eunuchs and asked him what news was causing such a commotion.

"News enough and evil news, O *Rab-chansha*¹!" answered the eunuch. "Revolt has broken out in Babylon, where that ungrateful dog of a Bel-ibni has turned on the hand that fed him, and as if that were not enough, there is news that the Egyptian

¹ Officer commanding fifty "couples," or a hundred men.

rabble at Zalu are on the march and advancing rapidly towards the north!" and the eunuch rushed off on some errand. A few instants later Nehushta found herself being introduced into a fairly large tent, not far from the royal pavilion, and a new fear assailed her. Would Neziach betray her secret, or would she prove loyal, and perhaps even help her to escape in the future? For the hope of escape was growing stronger within Nehushta's breast.

Fearing lest her future mistress should betray herself by some sign or exclamation, Nehushta, as soon as she entered the tent, fell on her knees and remained in the posture of humility, with her forehead touching the ground, until Dannai had delivered the *Tartan's* message and had withdrawn from the tent.

"Rise, O Miriam!" said Neziach, but as Nehushta approached the couch on which the young *Kedeshah* reposed, something in her face stirred Neziach's memory. With a sudden movement she rose and, seizing hold of Nehushta by the wrist, drew her close beneath the single lamp which served to light the tent. An exclamation of astonishment burst from her lips as she recognized the proud young Princess whom she had last seen standing by the side of the Prince Amon and surrounded by the fierce and warlike B'ne-Jeruel on the road to Hebron.

"Thou wilt not betray me?" asked Nehushta imploringly.

"Betray thee, Princess!" answered the *Kedeshah*, her voice filled with pity and wonder. "Nay, rather is it for me to kneel before thee, O daughter of the B'ne-David!" she continued, drawing Nehushta gently towards her and bidding her be seated on the couch beside her.

“But how comes it that thou art here? Is Jerusalem then fallen?”

Speaking in a low voice, Nehushta gave a rapid account of the events which had led her to the Assyrian camp, though she was not, naturally, aware of all that had happened. She knew merely that, through some treachery in which the Vizier Shebna was involved, the Assyrians had broken into the Palace, her grandmother had been murdered by the madwoman who had once threatened her own life, and she herself had been captured at the very moment of Amon's return.

“O daughter of David,” said Neziach when Nehushta had finished her narrative, “if thou wilt permit me to be thy friend—even though I be unworthy to kiss the hem of thy garment—I swear to thee by Baal-Jahveh, whom my fathers worshipped in Gilead, as thine did in Judah—I swear to thee by the memory of the lost love of my youth,” a sob interrupted Neziach's words, and Nehushta felt a warm tear drop on her hand, “I swear to thee that I will keep thy secret and perchance help thee to escape ere we draw too far from Judah, if so be that it lieth in my power!”

Nehushta wished to sleep, as was the custom, stretched on a carpet across the entrance to her mistress's tent, but this Neziach would not permit, and insisted on sharing her couch with the young Princess. And while Nehushta fell into a troubled sleep, almost the first she had known for three days, grave decisions were being taken close at hand.

In spite of the general success of the campaign, Sennacherib was beginning to feel a certain irritation at the trend of events, an irritation which showed itself in sudden rages and impossible demands upon his generals and troops. It is true that he had obtained

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rich spoils from Hezekiah and humbled his pride, but the King of Judah's capital, like some disdainful eagle in its eyrie, was still inviolate. It was true that he had victoriously invaded the whole land of the West, but that accursed Egyptian rabble and their North Arabian allies, whose exact strength and composition his numerous spies had been unable to ascertain, still hung far to the South like a threatening cloud on the horizon.

The season, too, was advancing, and soon it would be time to return to Nineveh. And now, after the news of the failure of the surprise attack on Jerusalem, came couriers with the news of the revolt in Babylon. That traitor, whom he had brought up at his own court in Nineveh, and whom he had placed on the throne of Babylon, had turned on him and joined the indomitable Merodach-baladan, the King of the Sea Lands, a man whom Sennacherib and his father, King Sargon, before him had been vainly striving to crush for the last twenty years! And as if all this were not enough, the Egyptians were at last advancing northwards. They had left Zalu and were said to be only three days' march from Gaza.

In the royal tent that night all those who were privileged to draw near the King and to speak freely before him gave their advice, while Sennacherib lay on his couch and listened with an angry scowl. Ardi-Belit, the Crown Prince; Ashur-Munik, another of the King's sons, whose first war expedition this was; Nikranu, the Commander of the Royal Bodyguard; Jamannu, the Commander of the Crown Prince's Regiment of Foot; Zeruti, the Master of the Chariots, and Nabu-acherba, the King's favourite soothsayer, who accompanied him everywhere, all gave their

opinion and advised different means of bringing the campaign to an end.

Ashur-killani alone had not spoken. With a gesture of impatient rage, Sennacherib suddenly rose to his feet.

"Enough of divided counsels! Thou alone, O Ashur-killani, thou who art the most loyal supporter of thy Lord's house, shalt finish the siege of this accursed city of Libnah, which seems to mock at me from its white cliffs, according to the plans which thou didst lay before me in the very beginning. Let there be no interference from any one," and the Great King looked significantly at his two sons, whose continual meddling in the conduct of operations was notorious throughout the army. There was not much love lost between the Great King and the Crown Prince. As for Ashur-Munik, he was a surly youth of seventeen, who was entirely ruled by his brother.

"Let not the loss of men frighten thee, O Ashur-killani! Even though I lose ten thousand men in one day, I swear by Ashur, my Father, that I will set my foot within the gates of Libnah before three days are gone!" He turned to the scribes who were in the tent. "Let messengers be sent immediately to the *Tartan* Nabuna'id and to the *Rab-shakeh* Bel-natsir, bidding them raise the siege of Jerusalem and hasten with all their forces to rejoin me here." A faint murmur of astonishment ran through those present, but it was instantly checked by the deepening scowl on the Great King's brow. "Then so soon as Libnah has fallen," he continued, "I will throw my entire army against Ekron and Timnath, the only two cities that still resist me. By the help of the might of Ashur, my Father; of the wisdom of Nebo, my Counsellor, and the Divine favour of the Lady Ishtar of

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Arbela, who is ever at my side, I will complete the overthrow of these two rebellious cities in a few days, and then, if the Kings of Egypt and the Princes of Melukha and of Mutsri do not slink back like jackals to their holes, I will overwhelm them like a flood! I will cut off their precious lives like a cord and utterly destroy their manhood like cucumber seed, as trophies! As for Jerusalem, I shall come again into the West next year, and then let Hezekiah beware!"

During the next two days Ashur-killani, utterly disdainful of human life, kept up a series of merciless attacks on the city with scaling-ladders, and on the night of the tenth of Elul, he threw hundreds of sappers against the gates. They succeeded in setting fire to three of them simultaneously and the Assyrians poured into the city like a devastating flood. Next morning, at dawn, Sennacherib came up from the plain below and with his own hand slew the Hebrew governor, while all the males above ten years of age were put to the sword and their corpses impaled around the wall.

Two days later, after a brilliant forced march, the *Tartan* Nabuna'id arrived at Libnah with the *Rabshakeh* and a part of the forces which had been besieging Jerusalem. The siege-machines and a good deal of the baggage were still among the hills and were expected to reach the main army in a few days, together with the rest of the troops.

In the meanwhile the position of the Assyrians, although they were apparently victorious everywhere, grew daily more insecure. The Pharaohs had effected a junction with the Kings of Melukha and of Mutsri, who had with them an unusual number of Libyan and Sardinian mercenaries, and, helped by the young

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Prince Tirhakah of Ethiopia, they had actually attacked Gaza, forced its King, Tsil-Baal, to capitulate, and were now advancing rapidly along the coast road.

It was absolutely necessary to stop their progress. If they should attack Ashkelon, where only a weak Assyrian garrison had been left, and Ashdod, where the loyalty of the ruler had been forced upon him by circumstances, the Assyrians would speedily find themselves in an awkward position. Even though Sennacherib held the warlike qualities of the Egyptians in contempt, he felt that, with Ekron and Timnath untaken to the North, and the constant menace of Jerusalem on his flank, they might give him considerable trouble. Another council of war was held, and the King's decision was confirmed. An immediate attack, with the full strength of the army, would be made on Timnath and Ekron, which were still resisting the moderate Assyrian forces which had been left to besiege them, Ashur-killani calculating that a week would see the end of both sieges, and the Assyrians could then advance down the coast road to defeat the Egyptians.

At the same time, on Nabuna'id's suggestion, Sennacherib resolved to send a letter to Hezekiah, repeating practically all the arguments and threats set forth by the *Rab-shakeh* at his interview with the Judean Viziers, and adding a few more. The letter called upon Hezekiah to admit an Assyrian garrison of two thousand men into Jerusalem, as an earnest of his future good behaviour, failing which the Great King swore by Ashur and by Ishtar of Arbela never to rest, even if he had to come every year into the West, until not one stone of the Hebrew capital remained upon another.

CHAPTER XIX

AMONG the spies that Amon had scattered over the land, none was cleverer and more faithful than a certain Shemidah, a Hebrew who had spent most of his life up and down Palestine, employed by one petty prince after another in the game of political intrigue which made of the whole Land of the West a very hotbed of potential and actual revolt against the continual encroachments of Assyrian power. For the last two years he had taken service under King Hezekiah, and he was one of the two or three men whom Amon had set to watch the Palace soon after Nehushta's return to Jerusalem, after her supposed capture by the B'ne-Jeruel; and often, when the Prince and Nehushta met in the Palace gardens, Shemidah had been close at hand and had thus often had occasion to see the Princess.

Immediately after the treacherous murder of the Hebrew envoys by the Assyrians, Amon had sent him forth to spy upon them, and he had followed the various sections of their troops which were scattered over Palestine, passing himself off as belonging to one or other of the many petty nationalities whose dialects he spoke with equal facility, and adopting all manner of disguises.

And so it came to pass that Shemidah, disguised as a beggar, sat by the gate appealing for alms in the names of all the gods of all the nations on the day

when the Great King drove victoriously in his chariot through the narrow streets of Ekron, having by his side blind Padi, whom he was about to replace on his throne. And when the beggar had seen the Great King pass by in all his glory, followed by a dazzling suite and by the principal prisoners made at the capture of Ekron, who were destined either to be flayed alive in front of the palace or to be impaled around the walls, his gaze was idly drawn to a litter with open curtains which had momentarily halted at a little distance from him, and in which reposed a beautiful girl. By the side of the litter walked several unveiled women, and Shemidah almost cried out aloud when he recognized in one of them the Princess Nehushta.

He knew only very indefinitely what had taken place in Jerusalem, as he had spent most of his time, during the previous few weeks, with the Assyrians who were besieging Ekron, in the guise of a Philistine idol-seller. Immediately after the capture of the city, thinking that he might hear valuable gossip in the bazaars, he had thrown his wares into a pit and reappeared in the disguise of a beggar at the city gate. He could not imagine in what way the real Princess Nehushta came to be an attendant on the supposed Princess, for he was well aware of the substitution by which the Great King had been tricked. But he knew well enough that if this were indeed the real Princess whom he beheld, and not some woman strangely resembling her, great wealth might be his if he were able to convey information as to her whereabouts to the Prince Amon. Wishing to make certain that his eyes did not deceive him, he introduced a new deity into his appeals, just as the litter was about to pass near him.

“Alms, O great and merciful ones! Alms, in the name of Ashur and the Lady Ishtar! Alms, in the name of Baal-Zebub of Ekron! Alms, in the name of Jahveh of Jerusalem!”

The last words were almost shouted, and though they attracted merely a few curious glances from the passing soldiers, Shemidah had the satisfaction of seeing Nehushta, for it was she, start and look round. A rapid glance passed between the beggar and the disguised Princess, a glance into which he was able to put such promise that the plant of hope which was beginning to take stronger and stronger root in Nehushta's heart, flowered anew. And that night, as soon as she found herself alone with Neziach, Nehushta told her of the presence of Shemidah in Ekron and of how his recognition of her had given new life and a definite direction to her hopes of escape.

For Nehushta knew, of course, that the siege of Jerusalem had been raised, and she felt certain that if some means could be found of conveying the knowledge of her fate to Amon, the Prince would sally forth at the first opportunity from the Holy City and lead a raid on the Assyrians to rescue her, even if he perished in the attempt. And here, almost within her grasp, Jahveh had placed a means of communication with Amon, for she was certain that the spy would be clever enough to find a way of access to her.

“Thou knowest not how brave, and strong, and cunning in warfare my beloved is!” Nehushta's eyes shone with pride and love as she described to Neziach the appearance of the Prince in the never-to-be-forgotten hour when he had almost hewn his way to her side through the living bodies of his enemies. “Had the gate been but a few paces further, he would have

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won to me!" continued Nehushta. "If only this servant of his, whom I saw to-day sitting in the gate dressed as a beggar, can find a way to me, I promise you, O Neziach, that I shall be saved."

"Aye, O Miriam," rejoined Neziach, who for prudence' sake continued to call Nehushta by her assumed name, "and I too have thought of a way to help thee, if the news of thy whereabouts can be conveyed to the Prince Amon." Enthusiasm animated her voice and shone in her eyes. "For when the Assyrians are about to withdraw from this land, I will pretend to be sick and ask the Great King to leave me behind a day's march, so that I may rest and recover. He will not refuse me, for his heart is well inclined towards me. If then thy beloved is warned to follow the rearguard of the Assyrians, he can fall upon the few soldiers who will be left to guard us, overcome them and win thee for his own again." The very next day Nehushta's faith in the resourcefulness of Shemidah was justified.

Sennacherib had resolved to remain a few days in Ekron while the final preparations for attacking the Egyptians were being carried out, and he had taken possession of the Royal Palace, where room had also been found for the principal officers of his suite and for Neziach and her maidens. The day after Nehushta had seen Shemidah in the gate, a rich Phœnician merchant, who had brought some wonderful materials from the Land of Sinim, three years' journey to the East, was granted permission by the chief eunuch to show them to the Princess Nehushta. A number of slaves carrying bales on their shoulders followed him, and among them Nehushta herself immediately recognized Shemidah. While Neziach was engaged in admiring and choosing some of these

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wonderful stuffs, which had all manner of marvellous animals and flowers woven into their very substance, and not merely embroidered upon them, as was the case with Assyrian and Babylonian materials, Nehush-ta, with beating heart, was able to exchange a few rapid words in Hebrew with Shemidah, unnoticed by the obsequious eunuchs who clustered round the Great King's favourite.

"For Jahveh's sake tell the Prince that I am safe," whispered Nehushta, while she pretended to be helping the slave to unloosen the ropes that bound one of the bales, "Tell him to follow after the Assyrians when they leave the land—I will linger behind—entreat him to save me!"

"Trust me; I will help thee," whispered Shemidah, "and I will return to thee when I have delivered thy message. Aye, girl," he continued in loud tones, as he noticed that the attention of one of the eunuchs was drawn towards them, "my master hath travelled for three years through burning deserts that he might bring these marvellous stuffs to thy mistress, and many times did we fight and conquer evil spirits and demons who sought to bar our way!"

The King of Assyria had entered Ekron on the twenty-fourth of Elul and he did not intend to begin his operations against the Egyptians until the first day of the month Tishri, because of the omens being most favourable on that date. For, in spite of their ferocity and their warlike qualities, the Assyrians were more affected than most soldiers by omens and presages, and they felt that, for some reason or other, the favour of their gods was being withdrawn from them. Material success had not been lacking to their arms, for within ten days of the return of the *Rab-shakeh* from

Jerusalem, both Timnath and Ekron had fallen, and although the worst previsions had been fulfilled with regard to the advance of the Egyptians, none doubted that they would be beaten in the coming battle. But day by day the royal astronomers, who accompanied the army, made known an unusually large number of unlucky conjunctions and dispositions of the celestial bodies which they had observed, and the effect on the soldiery became very marked.

One day even, at sunset, the globe of the sun had appeared to be twice its ordinary size, while three great shafts of bluish rays were seen to issue from it. Every one knew that this portended disaster to the King, and that it was a sign of great anger on the part of the God Shamash, an anger which he manifested by sending a great heat upon the land, causing many soldiers to sicken and die in a few hours because of the God's fiery shafts.

It was for these reasons that the Great King had decided that it would be best to ignore the omens which pointed to the first of Tishri as the most favourable date on which to attack the Egyptians. He would attack them almost immediately, and, by the mercy of the Lady Ishtar of Arbela, his Divine Patroness, he would win such a victory over them that all evil omens would be obliterated from the minds of his soldiers.

The Egyptians and their allies had advanced with extraordinary rapidity. They had recaptured Ashkelon and Ashdod after a very slight resistance, and were now encamped on the broad, rolling uplands which stretched between the Wady Sukereir and Yabneh-el, a city which had been in the hands of the Assyrians almost since the beginning of the campaign and which lay about five miles to the west of Ekron. A line of

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low hillocks ran south for a distance of some three miles from Yabneh-el, and then curved round to the south-west, enclosing a large, rolling plain between themselves and the sea. The Pharaohs were encamped on the southern edge of this plain, having immediately behind them the Wady Sukereir, with its steep banks, and about two miles or so in front of them the small fortified town of Altaku.

On the twenty-seventh of Elul, therefore, Ashur-killani began his operations by launching ten thousand men on this city. There was no question of battering-rams or of a regular siege. The attack was carried out by scaling-parties and by masses of sappers who fired the gates, and the number and fury of the assailants were so overwhelming that in a few hours they found themselves masters of the little city, which they intended to use as a base. Less than two miles of open corn-land now separated them from the Egyptian forces, and as evening was drawing near, they decided to postpone the general attack until the following day.

The *Tartans*, confident in the superior discipline and heavier equipment of their troops, did not intend to make any departure from the usual Assyrian tactics. Light troops would attack first, then the heavy infantry and the chariotry would advance, while the cavalry would hang like a dense cloud on the front and flanks of the enemy, confusing them by their ceaseless evolutions and riddling them with arrows. At the critical moment, reserves of heavy infantry would be thrown into the battle and would decide the day in favour of the Assyrians.

The Great King, however, had been affected, in spite of himself, by the general sense of discouragement and the unfavourable omens, and the reports

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of his spies concerning the real strength and composition of the Egyptian forces were so contradictory, that he decided, almost for the first time in the history of the Assyrian arms, to make a tactical use of a great part of his favourite arm, the cavalry. The two *Tartans* tried in vain to dissuade him, but his resolution was not to be shaken. And, as a matter of fact, had it not been for Sennacherib's generalship, the day would have ended in a great disaster for the Assyrians, not only because the number of chariots supplied by the King of Mutsri was much superior to what the spies had reported, but also because of a ruse which the Egyptians adopted in their disposition.

Ten squadrons of cavalry, some composed of three hundred archers and others of three hundred spearmen, marched silently out of Altaku that night. They were ordered to post themselves behind the hills which bounded the plain on the east, just at the point where they began to curve towards the south-west. They were to keep a good watch by means of mounted scouts, and when their commander considered the critical moment in the battle had come, they were to ride out of the hills and fall like a flood on the right flank of the Egyptians, in all probability breaking their lines and giving the victory without a doubt to the Assyrians.

The heat of the day had been terrible, and Sennacherib and his suite had caused their tents to be set up on a slight rise outside Altaku, from which the long, rolling sand-dunes and the Great Sea itself could be seen very easily. Immediately after sunset a number of spies were sent out to obtain any information they could regarding the final dispositions of the enemy, and they returned during the early part of the night with a strange story. For some reason or other the

Egyptians had neglected to dig their usual rectangular entrenched camp. They lay astride the coast-road, between the low hills to the east and the Nahr-Sukereir, which here, after a sharp bend, flowed almost parallel to the coast, in a wild confusion of Egyptian soldiery, Libyan and Sardinian mercenaries, soldiers of Mutsri and of Melukha, chariots, horses, camp followers and negro regiments from Ethiopia.

Keeping well out of the light of the enemy's camp fires, the spies had crept up as closely as they dared to various parts of the camp and almost everywhere they had come across numerous dead bodies, which bore no traces of wounds, but were strangely bloated and contorted. As a proof of their story, several of them had brought back Egyptian weapons, and two or three even carried into the Assyrian camp the severed heads of Libyan officers, adorned with towering plumes of ostrich feathers, ghastly trophies which they exhibited with pride. It was generally believed among the Assyrians that this was a sign that their gods were displeased with the Egyptians and their allies, and, taken in conjunction with the evidences of disorganization reported by the spies, the news produced a feeling of great elation throughout the army that night.

Sennacherib alone could not entirely free himself from the oppression and uncertainty which had of late preyed upon his mind. He dismissed all his attendants and spent some time going over in his mind the events of the last few months, while a sombre rage possessed him as he was forced to admit the inconclusive results of the campaign. Once more it seemed as if he would have to give up the projected expedition against Egypt, because of the revolt in Babylon, and his dreams of ruling over the ancient though decadent land of the

Pharaohs would perhaps never be fulfilled. The King at last retired to rest at an advanced hour of the night, after having offered a special prayer for help to his Divine Patroness, the Lady Ishtar of Arbela.

And in his sleep the Goddess appeared to him. Two quivers hung at her sides and in her hands she held a bow and a great battle sword. Her face was resplendent with a light such as that which the God Shamash pours forth at high noon, and in the King's dream her lips moved and she spoke to him thus—

“O thou who art the creature of my two hands, and the creature of Mighty Ashur, the Father who engendered me, go with a good heart into the fight, for I, Ishtar of Arbela, shall walk ever by thy side. Thy face shall not become pale, thy feet shall not slip, nor shall thy comeliness diminish in the midst of the battle, for a flame shall go forth from me to consume thine enemies !”

But suddenly a great sadness came over the features of the Goddess and a blood-red cloud gradually hid her from the King's eyes. And then it seemed to him that he was taken up into a high place whence he looked down upon a great plain entirely covered with the bodies of dead soldiers, and most of them were Assyrians, although some were Egyptians. Black clouds floated above the plain and great flights of vultures hovered over it. And as the Great King stood gazing sorrowfully upon his dead army, a blinding shaft of light pierced the black canopy of the heavens and in the light there stood a man of gigantic height, clad in shining armour and wielding a flashing sword. And a gentle voice came from his lips, speaking to the King and reciting his many titles—

“Sennacherib, the Great King, the Powerful King, the

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King of the World, King of Assyria, King of the Four Quarters, Watchful Shepherd, Favourite of the Great Gods, Protector of the Truth, Lover of the Right, Helper of the Weak, and Consumer of the Rebellious, hearest thou me ? ”

And the King answered, “ Yea, I hear thee ! ”

“ Sennacherib,” continued the voice, now become full of anger and loud as the thunder of the God Nergal, “ murderer and shedder of innocent blood, defiler of graves and breaker of thy faith, blasphemer and betrayer, whose blood shall be shed by thy own blood, behold the wrath of the Messenger of Jahveh ! ”

And the King awoke in the middle of the night and his heart was as water within him, neither could he sleep again before the dawn because he understood not the meaning of his dream.

Contrary to expectation, the Egyptians did not wait to be attacked. Shortly after the sun had risen over the low hills of the Shephelah, the Assyrian sentinels gave warning that long lines of Libyan mercenaries, who could easily be distinguished by the towering plumes of ostrich feathers worn by their officers, were advancing across the plain. The general alarm was sounded, and before the Libyans had advanced more than a few hundred yards the Assyrians gave good proof of their marvellous efficiency and discipline, for thousands of light infantry deployed in front of Altaku and rushed to meet the foe.

The battle soon became furious, for the Libyans were the best auxiliary troops which the Pharaohs could boast of. They were tall men, with fair skins, light hair and blue eyes, and at first the Assyrians, in spite of their superior numbers, gave way before the fierceness of their onslaught. But soon, amid the

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fearful noise of the battle and the cries of the wounded, could be heard the voices of the Assyrian captains, shouting their commands as calmly as if they were on parade, and nearly ten thousand heavy infantry, spearmen and slingers, wearing coats of mail and crested helmets, dashed forward to reinforce the lighter Assyrian troops, while strong bodies of cavalry, making a detour over the sand-dunes to the west of the coast-road, began their ceaseless evolutions and attacks on the Egyptian left flank.

From a slight eminence on which the royal tent stood, Sennacherib, hastily summoned by his servants, sombrely watched the beginning of the battle, while his drivers and slaves prepared his great war-chariot and harnessed two huge and savage black stallions trained to attack the horses of any opposing chariot with their hoofs and teeth. The Great King, however, would not join the fight until his troops had worn out the enemy and were near to winning the victory. Although he was thoroughly hardened by many years of campaigning, during his own and his father's reigns, Sennacherib was nearing his fortieth year and wished to spare himself as much as possible.

After nearly two hours' furious fighting the plain became littered with weapons, equipment, armour, dead horses, and hundreds of the slain and wounded of both sides, and the *Tartans*, seeing that the battle was going too evenly, decided to throw the whole of their reserves of heavy infantry and their chariotry on to the enemy, especially as the first Egyptian and allied chariots were beginning to form into line across the plain. The charge was sounded and soon, amid the thunder of the horses' hoofs and rolling clouds of dust, the Assyrians moved forward in a flashing line, led

by Zeruti, the Commander of the Chariots, himself.

As a rule there was no infantry in the world that could resist unbroken the first shock of the heavy Assyrian chariots. When the enemy battalions saw them arriving, fleet as the wind, filling the air with the thunder of their horses' hoofs and the rumble of their iron-tired wheels, bearing the warriors with their spears poised and their bows fully strung, their line broke and they dispersed over the plain after discharging a volley of arrows, while the Assyrians crushed many of the fugitives under their wheels. The charioteers would then jump down to kill wounded enemies, or, standing in front of their horses and well protected by their shield-bearers, they would calmly take aim at some enemy chief, and then remount and reform their line for a fresh charge. In the same way, whenever the Assyrian chariotry met the much lighter Egyptian chariots, the advantage was all on the side of the Assyrians, unless there were a great disparity in number. And now the *Tartans* realized with a certain anxiety that the chariots that were advancing against them were at least twice as many as those of the Assyrians.

Changing their usual tactics, too, the Egyptian chariots, instead of setting off at a gentle trot in line formation and gradually increasing their speed, came like a whirlwind across the plain, almost without any formation.

The Assyrians supported the shock well, but were soon in difficulties, owing to the irregular formation of the Egyptians, and it was at that moment that the *Tartans* became suddenly aware of a new and unforeseen danger. Unsuspected reserves of chariots were racing out of the extreme south-east of the plain and dashing straight for the exposed left flank of the Assyrian army.

The curve of the hills which has already been mentioned did not reach as far as the steep banks of the Nahr Sukereir. Between the last gentle slopes and the stream itself there was a flat neck of land, two hundred yards wide, running back into the hills, and at some distance from the plain, completely hidden by the undulations of the ground, lay the village of Burkah. Around this village the Egyptians had cunningly held a reserve of at least three hundred chariots of the King of Mutsri, chariots whose presence had remained undiscovered by the spies.

The Great King, too, saw the danger and gave thanks to the Lady Ishtar, who had so divinely inspired him to post his cavalry in hiding in case such a critical moment should arise. The cavalry scouts had given the main body timely warning of the cunning manœuvre of the Egyptians, and they were beginning to pour forth from the hills in glittering squadrons, striving to cut off the reserves of Egyptian chariots, so as to give time to the Assyrians to recover and reform their shattered line.

Donning his coat of mail and his battle-helmet, the Great King called out to his drivers to bring his war-chariot. He patted the fiery horses and spoke encouraging words to them. "Ho, Rage of Ashur! Ho, Nergal! bear me well this day in the name of the Lady Ishtar!" He sprang in and the chariot darted off into the thick of the fight, followed by a hundred lancers of the royal bodyguard. But already the danger had been averted.

The unexpected intervention of the Assyrian cavalry not only broke the charge of the Egyptian chariot reserves, but turned the tide of battle in favour of the Assyrians, for, although both sides had suffered terrible

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losses during the three hours that the battle had lasted, the Egyptians finally began to give way; their lines wavered and broke and soon the whole army was in flight towards the south-east, in their endeavour to reach Burkah, where it would be possible to ford a branch of the Nahr Sukereir, and to throw themselves into Ashdod, which they still held.

It was the most costly victory which the Assyrians had won during the whole campaign. It is true that they had captured the two sons of the King of Mutsri and the commander of his chariots, as well as the commander of the Melukhan chariotry, and that they had obtained great booty in the shape of weapons, equipment, gold-handled daggers and swords, and great quantities of gold and silver jewellery from the bodies of the slain officers, but the main body of the Egyptian and allied armies had escaped and was free to reform and to attack them again. As for the Assyrians, they had lost many hundreds of killed and wounded, besides valuable leaders. Jamannu, the Commander of the Crown Prince's Regiment of Foot, and Zeruti, the Master of the Chariots, had been killed, while Ashur-Munik, the King's younger son, who had insisted on taking part in the charge, had been taken prisoner.

But although direct victory was denied to the Egyptians, a terrible and dreaded ally had accompanied them on their northward progress: an ally who was destined to take a heavier toll of Assyrian lives than a hundred battles. From Zalu to Gaza, along the route followed by the Egyptians, there stretched a line of lagoons and bogs, around which there were many filthy villages of salt-makers and fish-curers: villages inhabited by underfed and imbecile people who always had disease among them, and here the Egyptian armies

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had become infected with the dreaded plague, which had begun to appear among them after they had reached the damper climate of Philistia. Here, too, their camps, filled with offal and waste, and with the carcasses of animals dead of sickness after the terrible march across the desert, had become infested by an ever-increasing number of huge rats.

Immediately after the battle of Altaku, reports began to pour in that on the site of the Egyptian camp many hundreds of dead and dying Egyptians had been found, their bodies strangely swollen and contorted, and some with a dangerous madness upon them. And when the two sons of the King of Mutsri were brought before Sennacherib, instead of the usual defiant attitude of royal captives in such circumstances, they presented an unwonted spectacle. Their limbs trembled, their gait and their speech were uncertain, and their eyes shone with the light of delirium: They had been stripped of their armour and of most of their rich clothing, and great swellings appeared on their necks and breasts. Even as they stood in the royal tent, such a furious madness came upon one of them that the King was forced to kill him with his own spear in self-defence, while the other was led away to execution.

Within three days the uncertainty that had of late obsessed the Assyrian commanders as to the ending of the campaign was turned into a horrible certainty, for they were faced with the possibility that there would be little of the army left to finish any campaign. Like a fire in dry grass the strange sickness, which the Assyrians considered was caused by the anger of some god, spread through their ranks.

The priests and soothsayers uttered their most potent exorcisms and prepared their most powerful charms.

Great braziers were built up all over the camp and all kinds of incense and costly spices were burnt in them, while the *Barus* stood by and threw into the fire dates cut in pieces, wool and goats' hair. At night their prayers rose on the air like the wailing of lost souls.

"As this date has been cut in pieces and thrown into the fire, as the ardent flames consume it, as he who had gathered it cannot replace it upon its stalk, nor may it ever again serve to nourish the King, as this wool and this goat's hair shall never return to the backs of the beasts upon which they grew, nor shall they ever serve to weave garments for the King, so may Ashur, Merodach, Ea, Bel and Ishtar destroy the evil which afflicts the people and break the bonds of the all-devouring disease, of sin, of perversity and of crime !"

All was in vain. The Assyrians began to die by tens, by dozens, by fifties, by hundreds. At the same time bands of emboldened Hebrews and Bedawin began to come forth from unconquered Jerusalem and to raid the smaller Assyrian garrisons that had been left in the Shephelah. Fear, like a thief in the night, crept into the Great King's heart when he remembered his dream of the night before the battle. He decided to abandon his army to their fate, at any rate until the pestilence should subside. He would remove himself and his suite to a spot some five miles distant from the infected camp, in accordance with the advice of the soothsayers.

CHAPTER XX

THE Prince Amon lay stretched on a divan in his house in the Upper City, and by his side sat Shaftan. Nine days had elapsed since the terrible moment when he had seen Nehushta borne away before his very eyes, and had it not been for the great strength that was in him, and the careful tending of Shaftan, his faithful comrade in arms, who had watched by his side almost without ceasing, the raging fever that came upon him because of the wounds he had received at the stairway by the Pool, and because of the torture he had undergone in the Edomite's house, would have put an end to his life before now. The King's own Babylonian physician, too, had visited him often, and daily there came the officials from the Palace to inquire after his welfare.

As he listened now to Shaftan's account of the departure of the Assyrian troops from before Jerusalem and the rejoicings of the inhabitants thereat, great tears welled forth from his eyes.

"Alas, old friend," he said, "I pray thee, let not my words reach the King's ears, for they would grieve him sorely, but what matters it to me now whether Jerusalem be safe? Of what value is the casket when the shining jewel which it held is gone for ever? Sooner would I have died fighting in the last assault, and with my own dagger have put an end to Nehushta's life,

than that she should have become the prey of those Assyrian dogs ! ”

“ If only thou hadst been readier to listen to my suspicions, O Prince ! ” replied Shaftan. “ If that accursed Shebna had been stoned to death at the gates, or even safely shut up in the court of the prison, and his henchman, Bela, put to death like the foul carrion that he was, thou wouldst not be mourning thy heavy loss to-day ! ”

“ Bela’s end I know, but what punishment was meted out to Shebna by the King, Shaftan ? ”

“ None by the King, but nevertheless he found a fit ending at the last. There on the hill, on the other side of Hinnom, when men went forth from the city after the departure of the Assyrians, to give burial to what was left of our captured Hebrew warriors who had been impaled within sight of the walls, they found Shebna upon the highest stake of all. He must have escaped to his accomplices, and the Assyrians, in their rage at the failure of the plot, must have put him to death. Our men recognized him by the Vizier’s ring which he still wore upon his finger. Strange that those thieving Assyrians should have overlooked it ! His bones were thrown into the valley of Hinnom to rot ; may they lie unburied for ever ! ”

The Prince lay for a time gazing moodily in front of him, and Shaftan bethought himself that it were wise that he should forget his grief.

“ There is good news, though, regarding the Egyptians. They seem to have been shamed at last into attempting something, after all their boasting, for it appears that they moved across the desert from Zalu and that they are now besieging Gaza. Why dost thou not beseech the King to let thee have a couple

of thousand men and let us harry the Assyrian rear-guard and raid the Shephelah ? They may soon have their hands full if the Egyptians advance up the coast, and we might be able to destroy a few of the scattered garrisons which those accursed dogs have left down among the foothills, and after that thou might'st join the Egyptians. 'Twill serve to keep thy spirit from brooding ! ”

“ By Jahveh, thou art right, Shaftan ! ” cried Amon, rising to his feet with a sudden access of energy. “ I will try to forget that I ever loved ; I'll steep my very soul in the fierce fighting that once made the sole joy of my life ! 'Twill bring peace to my spirit to flesh my sword in Assyrian bodies, though were I to kill one for every hair of Neshushta's head, it would not satisfy my lust of vengeance. To-morrow I will go myself to the King and entreat him to let me go forth that I may slay and destroy them like vermin ! ”

On the following day, when the force of the sun's rays had begun to abate, Amon revisited the Palace for the first time since the treacherous attack which had so nearly brought about the fall of the Holy City. He was received by the King with all the honour due to his mighty deeds, and sat upon the King's right hand, but before he could ask the favour that he desired, officials came to say that messengers from the Great King had arrived in Jerusalem, bringing a letter from their master for the King of Judah.

King Hezekiah ordered them to be brought before him, and, taking the letter from their hands himself, he had it read to him by Joach-ben-Asaph, the royal secretary. It was written in the Syrian language, on a roll of papyrus, and repeated the insolent arguments already used by the *Rab-shakeh*. It ended

with Sennacherib's threat to return to Palestine the following year and not to rest so long as one stone of Jerusalem remained upon another.

The Vizier Eliakim, Amon, Shaftan and the King's uncle, who were also in the royal apartment, looked at each other in perplexity while they listened to the King of Assyria's boastful threats. Achimelech-ben-Jotham was the first to speak.

"What answer wilt thou give, O son of my brother?"

The King stretched out his hand and, taking the roll, placed it in the bosom of his garment, and ordered that the messengers should be sent forth from the city, unharmed, before nightfall, but that no reply should be vouchsafed to them. He waited until they and the eunuchs and officials who had introduced them had left the royal presence before he spoke again.

"O brother of my father," he said, turning to Achimelech-ben-Jotham, "a little while ago, because I prayed to Jahveh, my life was spared. I will go up again to His Temple, but this time will I go near unto His very dwelling-place. I will enter into the Holy of Holies and place this letter before the Holy One of Israel on the Holy Ark itself, and perchance Jahveh will hear my prayers and will rebuke the words of Sennacherib, wherewith he hath sent to reproach the living God!"

A thrill of horror ran through all those present when they heard the words of the King.

"Surely, Lord," said Eliakim, "thou wilt not attempt this thing? Hast thou forgotten the fate that befell King Uzziah, the father of thy father's father, because he entered the Holy of Holies? Did not Jahveh strike him, so that he was a leper all the days of his life thereafter?"

“Nevertheless will I go to-night, even at the hour of the evening sacrifice, to prostrate myself before Jahveh and implore His favour. For King Uzziah was moved by a proud spirit to prove himself the equal of Jahveh’s High Priest, who alone hath the right to enter into the Holy of Holies, once a year, on the day on which a solemn atonement is made for the sins of the people, but I am moved to defend the glory and might of Jahveh Himself, and if He strike me, my blood be upon my head !”

A feeling of Divine elation had taken possession of the King’s soul. He seemed almost as one walking in a dream when, accompanied by Amon and Eliakim, and escorted by twenty *Gibborim*, he betook himself to the Temple at the time of the evening sacrifice, entering by the great ceremonial gate on the east and through the Porch of King Solomon.

Azariah, the venerable High Priest, had been summoned to the Palace, and when the King informed him of his intention, he also had sought, but in vain, to dissuade him. For, although the Kings of Judah possessed the fullest privileges in connection with the great sanctuary which they had built and richly endowed, the privilege of entering into the Holy of Holies had tended more and more ever since the days of King Solomon to become the appanage of the High Priests, and even they only entered the sacred place once a year.

The outer court was thronged with masses of people, many of whom brought lambs and doves with them, for private sacrifices had recommenced. Everywhere barefooted priests, with their white robes, conical caps and blue girdles, strove to keep the crowds from pressing round the King to kiss the hem of his mantle, for

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news of the royal resolution had already spread through Jerusalem, and when he passed from the outer court all the people fell on their knees, crying, "Jahveh look with favour upon thee, Son of David!"

The solemn moment of the offering of the incense by a solitary priest within the Temple itself had arrived, and when the King came into the inner court the white clouds of smoke could be seen through the open doors of the sanctuary, ascending in the dim twilight which was fast deepening into night.

The incensing priest came out on the steps in front of the sanctuary, and was joined by the four others who had helped him to clean and prepare the altar of incense and to light the lamps of the ten candelabra which burnt throughout the night in the Holy House. With extended hands they pronounced the benediction of the priests, to which the King listened with bowed head, and thereupon the singing of the Temple choir, signifying the end of the sacrificial service, burst forth in the outer court, amid the prayers of the people. All but two of the priests now gradually withdrew from the inner court, while Amon, Eliakim, Shaftan and the *Gibborim*, to all of whom the priests had distributed lighted torches, stood around the King, to the east of the great stone altar. Before them rose the majestic pylon of the Temple itself, towering into the night sky above and flanked on either side by the two Holy Pillars, Jachin and Boaz.

"Kinsman," implored Amon, making a last attempt to dissuade the King from his purpose, "think well before thou ventarest! Remember the fate of the men of Beth-shemesh who gazed at the Holy Ark, although in reverence, and were struck down by Jahveh's lightnings!"

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The Prince, who would have faced fifty men without a quiver, trembled inwardly before the unknown wrath of the Holy God upon the threshold of whose sanctuary they stood.

“Nay, Amon, seek not to stay me, for my hands are clean before the Holy One of Israel, nor is there any fear in me.”

With slow gait the King of Judah ascended the twelve steps, made of the costliest marbles, which led into the sanctuary. The flickering light of the torches, shining through the great doorway into the interior of the Temple, threw into relief the gigantic figures of the Cherubim carved upon its walls, while the flames of the ten huge candelabra, ranged down each side of the Temple, shone with a star-like radiance. For a moment, as the two priests who followed the King closed the olive-wood doors of the Temple behind him, while they remained with bowed heads on the steps, it seemed to Amon that, at the farther end, a glittering wall of fire moved and trembled like a living thing.

The powerful odour of the incense, which was burnt twice a day in the Temple, filled the air, and, mingled with the faint balsamic fragrance of the cedar wood with which the whole building was lined, it produced a kind of subtle intoxication in the King's mind as he walked slowly towards the Holy of Holies. His heart was wrung with sorrow as he gazed slowly around him and saw the effects of the spoliation which the Temple had undergone to pay the colossal ransom demanded by the Assyrians. The gold candelabra still remained, but all the gold plates which covered the wings of the great cherubim and the leaves of the palm-trees carved in relief on the walls were gone, as were also the gold coverings of the outer doors. At the further end of the

Temple, where two gold chains of a handbreadth in thickness, weighing many talents, had stretched in front of the Holy of Holies, there remained but one.

A partition of olive wood separated the Holy of Holies from the main body of the Temple, and in the centre of this partition there was a wide opening; closed by a marvellous double veil, woven of the finest Egyptian linen. Its texture was so light and diaphanous that it was continuously in motion, and this motion agitated the wings of the Cherubim embroidered upon it, so that they appeared to be constantly in flight. In front of this veil there hung a heavy silver lamp, suspended from the ceiling by silver chains. Since it had been lighted by the hand of the High Priest Zadok, with fire from the great altar, at the dedication of the Temple by King Solomon, this lamp had never been suffered to be extinguished.

For some time the King stood at the bottom of the three steps that led up into the Holy of Holies, for a great terror had come upon him. His limbs trembled violently, his teeth chattered, and the hair of his flesh rose up. But nevertheless, with a resolute movement, he drew the veil aside and went in.

At first he could see nothing, for the whole place was entirely enclosed with the exception of the opening through which he had entered. But soon, by the help of the faint golden light which filtered through the veil, he was able to distinguish the two great images of the Cherubim towering over him. Between them, and underneath their outstretched wings, the King perceived a glittering radiance, in front of which, approaching slowly, he prostrated himself, and, drawing the King of Assyria's letter from his garment, he laid it reverently on the Holy Ark. For some moments he

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remained silent, with closed eyes, and then fervent words of supplication rose to his lips.

“O Jahveh, who sittest upon the Cherubim, incline Thy ear and hear the words of Sennacherib, where-with he hath sent to reproach the living God! Of a truth, the Kings of Assyria have wasted the nations and cast their gods into the fire, for they were no gods but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone; but Thou, O Jahveh, art the living God, who hast made the heavens and the earth, and I beseech Thee now to save us out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art the Lord, and Thou only!”

It seemed to the King that the radiance which surrounded the Ark grew brighter and, of a sudden, he felt himself bathed in a Divine peace, which irradiated his whole being. His terrors fell away from him as the terrors of an evil dream are put to flight by the dawn. His mind became clear as the water of a mountain-spring and full of understanding. He saw the beginning and the ending of all things, he was exalted above men in a way which he had never experienced before, and it seemed to him that he was being borne into the air by invisible hands.

With a feeling of deep gratitude and humility, he withdrew from the Holy Place, and when he opened the doors of the Temple and stood again on the steps, those who rushed forward to welcome him drew back abashed before him and fell on their knees, for his countenance was transfigured and was resplendent with a Divine glory.

And when he and those that were with him had come again into the Palace, they beheld a group of men standing by the canopied fountain in the middle of the

court. Under the soft, yet brilliant light of the new-risen moon, one of them came forward. He wore a short, coarse tunic, girdled at the waist with a rope, his feet were bare and his long black hair fell below his shoulders. It was Mahershalal, the son of the Holy Prophet Isaiah. And Mahershalal prostrated himself not, neither did he bow himself before the King, for he was a Nazirite, but he spoke to him as a man speaketh to his brother.

“Greetings, O King ! I bring thee a message from the Holy Prophet, and this is his message : ‘Thus saith the Holy One of Israel, Whereas thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib, King of Assyria, I have heard thee, and thy prayer is granted. For I am Jahveh, thy God and the God of thy fathers, and I know the King of Assyria’s sitting down, and his going out and his coming in, and his raging against Me, and because of his arrogancy and his raging against Me, I will put My hook in his nose and My bridle in his lips and I will turn him back by the way he came, for I will defend this city to save it, for Mine own sake, and My servant David’s sake.’ ”

And the King knew that his prayer had been heard and that Jahveh had been very near to him that night, and when Amon, on the following day, asked that men might be given him so that he might harry the Assyrians, and clear the land of their garrisons, the King assented at once to the Prince’s request, for there was a great faith in his heart, nor did he any longer fear for the safety of Judah or of Jerusalem.

A week later, two thousand hardened soldiers, chiefly Hebrews, with a sprinkling of reliable Arabs, among whom the B’ne-Jeruel were conspicuous, came down from the cliffs and mountains of Judah into the glens

and moors of the Shephelah. Led by Amon and Shaftan, they recaptured Kirjath-jearim by a night surprise, slaughtering every man of the foreign garrison, so that not one was left to carry the news to the Assyrians. And on the first of Tishri Amon celebrated the New Year with a sacrifice of two bulls and seven lambs on the hill of Beth-Shemesh, which they had also recaptured. For, in spite of the King's attempt to forbid all sacrifices except in the Temple at Jerusalem, the people still offered sacrifices at many shrines throughout the country. That same evening some of Amon's scouts, who had gone down into the plains, brought back news of the great battle which had just been fought before Altaku, and in which it was said that the Egyptians had been routed after having inflicted great losses on the Assyrians. The scouts spoke, too, of a strange sickness which had slain hundreds in the Egyptian army, a sickness which killed men sometimes in less than a day and made others mad and which had also appeared among the Assyrians.

And at early dawn on the following day the great news came to the Prince. He had decided that his next attempt should be a raid in force on Timnath, and, having arisen early, he and Shaftan were watching the captains and other officers mustering the expedition outside the gates. Across the Valley of Sorek the houses of Zorah, the birthplace of Samson, stood out dazzlingly white in the morning sunshine, while down in the bottom of the valley a pebbly stream, bordered by screens of red-blossomed oleanders, flowed west towards the Great Sea. Suddenly a man stepped from behind some boulders a little way down the hill and, holding up his hands to show that he was unarmed,

advanced rapidly towards the spot where the Prince and Shaftan were standing. Amon's keen eyes were the first to recognize him.

"'Tis Shemidah, one of the men I sent forth to spy on the Assyrians," he remarked to Shaftan.

"Master ! Lord !" cried the spy eagerly, throwing himself at Amon's feet, "I bring great news !"

"Thou art somewhat late with thy news, O spy !" interposed Shaftan grimly. "Our own men have already brought us news of the battle at Altaku and of the way it went."

"Nay, Lord," continued Shemidah, rising and speaking again to Amon, "'tis not of battles I would speak. I bring thee news that will make thy heart rejoice as it never rejoiced before ! The Princess Nehushta lives and dwells in safety among the Assyrians !"

With a great shout Amon seized him by the shoulders.

"By Jahveh, if thou deceivest me, thy life shall be forfeit ! Where is she ? Speak, man, speak !" In his great excitement the Prince held the unfortunate spy as in a vice, so that he cried out in pain.

"By the father of all spies, Lord," he smiled through his pain, "if thou killest me, then I cannot speak at all !"

With a smothered exclamation of impatience Amon relaxed his grip and listened with growing amazement and deep joy while Shemidah related how the Great King had come to look with favour upon the little *Kedeshah*, Neziach, whom he thought to be the Princess Nehushta, and how the real Princess, sent as a gift to the *Tartan* Ashur-killani, had by him been given as an attendant to Neziach, because the Assyrian general had no thoughts for any woman but the daughter of the Prince of Ashdod.

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"I saw her and spoke to her nine days ago," continued Shemidah; "she was well and safe and bade thee do thy utmost to rescue her."

The Prince's excitement was intense and reflected itself in his face as he turned to Shaftan, who, although he fully shared Amon's joy, remained calmer in the expression of it.

"Shaftan, old friend, quick! Tell me how we shall set about this business! By Jahveh, I will rescue her if I have to wade in Assyrian blood up to my neck!"

"Calm thyself, Prince!" replied the old warrior smilingly. "Let us hear first whether Shemidah have any further news, and then we may think out a way to accomplish this thing by cunning, for surely thou dost not aspire to fight the Great King's army single-handed? Did the Princess say aught else, Shemidah?"

"Aye, Lord," replied the spy, "she said that when the Assyrians left the land she would endeavour to linger behind a day's march, and that thou shouldst follow after them and attempt to rescue her. But if I read aright 'twill be some time ere the Assyrians leave the land, and when they do," continued Shemidah with a grim laugh, "not many of them will ever see Nineveh again!"

"How sayest thou?" asked Shaftan, surprised.

"Why, Lord, thou hast heard how a pestilence hath broken out among them, but thou little knowest its deadliness. The very day after the battle the Assyrians began to die. Their camp became a very charnel-house, and two days ago the Great King abandoned his army with all his suite and officers and, taking two thousand picked men, he went into camp on

the great plain which lies to the south of Ekron and to the east of Makkedah, for he feared to quarter the troops in Ekron itself, lest in the narrow streets of the town the disease might spread more rapidly. In the main camp they are dying by thousands and their bodies lie about like so many dead sheep, nor do they know which way to turn. For if they stay, they fear they will die to the last man, and the few leaders whom the Great King has left in charge of the army will not let them go, for the soothsayers say they will carry the pestilence with them back to Nineveh and thousands will die throughout Assyria. So the soothsayers have persuaded the Great King to stay at Makkedah until the pestilence shall have spent its strength and the anger of the gods be appeased."

A fresh fear came to damp Amon's new-found joy as he thought of the danger to Nehushta from the raging plague, a fear which he expressed aloud, but which Shemidah partly set at rest.

"Nay, Lord," said the spy, "fear not for the Princess. I heard news that she and her mistress were ordered to rejoin the Great King's camp, which is situated at the extreme north-west of the plain, about a mile from the gates of Ekron. The whole of this camp is surrounded, partly by the Wady Balkash and partly by a deep trench in which great fires are kept up day and night and in the fires they burn spices so that the plague may not enter there."

"Canst thou seek another interview with the Princess, Shemidah?" asked Shaftan, who appeared to have been thinking deeply for a few instants.

"Aye, Lord, I can always find means of getting into the Assyrian camp."

"Well, do thou at once seek the Princess and tell

her that we know all and that we shall endeavour to rescue her within a few days from now, so that she may be prepared to help us when the time comes; and after thou hast delivered thy message, return to us at Gederoth, farther down this Valley of Sorek."

"At Gederoth?" inquired Shemidah, with a puzzled air. "Why, though there be no Assyrians in the town itself, it is but a couple of miles from their camp on the Plain of Makkedah!" Shaftan smiled and turned towards the Prince.

"Listen now, Amon, to my plan, and do thou also listen, Shemidah, and thou shalt understand. We have two thousand strong men and some two hundred war-horses with us here at Beth-shemesh. Thou, O Amon, shalt give up thy raid on Timnath, and instead, let eighteen hundred of the men, led by officers whom thou canst trust, raid Gezer, well to the north-east of the Assyrian camp. When the news of the raid reaches them, as it is certain to do, they will not look for danger from the south, where Gederoth lies. In the meantime, we will take fifty horses and two hundred men and to-morrow night we will travel secretly down the valley. We will hide at dawn in the hills to the south of Gederoth and at night again, after having sent scouts ahead, we will enter Gederoth itself. If Shemidah's account be true, the Assyrians will be too disheartened to keep proper watch, and at the first possible opportunity, of which Shemidah may be able to inform us, we will attack them from the side of the Wady Balkash."

"But how shall two hundred of us prevail against two thousand Assyrians?" asked Amon.

"Why, in this way, Prince," continued Shaftan. "At night we will march northwards, keeping behind

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the line of hills which run from Makkedah to Ekron. When we get abreast of the camp, we will leave the horses with their riders and two spare horses posted just below the crest of the hills. The remainder of us, about one hundred and fifty men, will steal silently across the wady and surprise the sentinels. Twenty *Gibborim* will have orders to guard and surround thee and, led by Shemidah, thou canst make straight for Nehushta's tent, seize her and escape back across the wady to where the horses will await thee. Once among them, mount and make straight for Gezer and the Assyrians will have to be swift indeed to catch thee."

"But what about thee and the rest of our men, Shaftan?" asked the Prince.

"Disturb not thy soul about us, Amon! We will fight to keep the Assyrians occupied and then we will—we will cut our way out again!" ended Shaftan with assumed joviality. "And if we do not succeed," continued the old warrior, seeing the anxious look on the Prince's face and laying his hand affectionately on his shoulder, "what matters it, boy, as long as thou escapest? I am old and have run my course and there are still many men of war left in Judah. But thou and Nehushta, ye are the hope of the B'ne-David!"

The Prince's eyes were misty with emotion as he embraced the old warrior. Followed by Shemidah, he and Shaftan walked back to the place where the soldiers were rapidly gathering, and calling the two chief captains to him, he informed them of the change in his plans. And, as shall be seen, there was no need for Shaftan's sacrifice, because of the way in which Jahveh brought matters to pass.

CHAPTER XXI

WHILE Sennacherib was occupied in launching his attack against Altaku and in fighting the great battle with the Egyptians, Neziach and her attendants remained in the Royal Palace at Ekron, and when, two days after the battle, several hundred soldiers, returning to the city to form its permanent Assyrian garrison, brought news of the rout of the Egyptians, Nehushta's hopes of deliverance had not as yet in any way diminished. For not only did she feel complete faith in Shemidah's ability to warn Amon and in the Prince's courage and daring, but she also knew that the Assyrians must now very soon be setting their faces northwards, and then would come her opportunity either to be rescued or to escape. For even if by some mischance Amon were unable to come to her help, she was determined that when Neziach, feigning sickness, should ask of the Great King permission to stay behind for a little time, she would escape alone, hide among the hills and strive to find her way to Jerusalem unaided. Nothing worse than death could befall her, and even that would be far preferable to an eternal separation from Amon or to the fate which she began to foresee in the near future.

For Nehushta was fully conscious of her own glorious beauty and of the open admiration which it excited, not only among the rough soldiers with whom she was

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often forced to mingle, since custom required that she should go about freely and unveiled with the other attendants of Neziach, but also among those of very high degree.

With the Assyrians who returned to Ekron after the battle there came the Crown Prince Ardi-Belit, who was not overfond of the rough life of the camp, and, meeting Nehushta by chance in the court of the Palace, he had looked at her in a way that made the hot blood of shame rise to her cheeks. She knew well enough that if any Assyrian deigned to bestow his favour upon her, he would have little difficulty in obtaining the Great King's permission to take her away from her present position of safety and to make of her what she had sworn by Jahveh never to be to any man except Amon.

In the meanwhile the dreaded pestilence was stalking over the whole countryside with gigantic strides. The soldiers who returned from Altaku to Ekron, laden with Egyptian booty and clothing, brought it with them. The very day of their arrival twenty were struck down and died in a few hours, and two days later it was raging throughout the city. As for the Assyrian army which lay before Altaku, in close vicinity to the corpse-strewn battlefield, their camp became a veritable charnel-house, and to add to its horrors the enormous rats whose appearance has already been mentioned, multiplied to such an extent as to render it almost untenable. They came into the soldiers' tents even in the daytime, snatched the food out of their hands, and often, before some miserable wretch, delirious with fever, could exhale his last breath, the horrible animals attacked him and devoured his half-living body before the eyes of his

horror-stricken comrades. Hundreds of soldiers deserted, to spread the infection still farther throughout the coast towns, and on the fourth of Tishri Sennacherib, at his wits' end, dreading the danger for himself, but not wishing to leave Palestine altogether or to abandon the army to its fate, decided to remove himself and his suite to the plain of Makkedah, south of Ekron, and some five miles distant from Altaku. The Great King dreaded the confinement of the towns, where the pestilence spread, if anything, more rapidly, and chose this encampment on the advice of his soothsayers.

The plain was shaped like a rectangle, and one of its short sides, running north-west from Makkedah to Ekron, was bounded by a low chain of hills, in front of which there ran a dry watercourse, the Wady Balkash, a branch of the Wady Gederoth. For the site of the encampment a spot was selected along the eastern bank of this wady, about a mile distant from the southern gate of Ekron. A trench, six feet wide and four feet deep was dug, in the shape of a semicircle. It started and ended at the bank of the wady, the distance between its two ends being some two hundred and fifty yards, and inside this space were pitched the royal tents and those of the King's suite, as well as those of all his chief officers and of some two thousand picked soldiers. Sentinels were posted at intervals along this trench, day and night; a great quantity of provisions was amassed within the camp, and orders were given to kill any one going in or out. In the trench itself enormous fires were kept up, into which large quantities of spices and resins were constantly being thrown, while the priests came nightly to them to recite their prayers and to perform their exorcisms. And although the eastern bank of the wady was

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very steep, a good many sentinels were also posted along it, so that the camp was well protected on all sides.

The day after the arrival of Sennacherib, Neziach and Nehushta arrived in the camp, the supposed Princess and her favourite attendant being, as usual, given a tent within the royal enclosure, which was situated on the western side of the camp, and about thirty or forty yards from the banks of the wady. A wooden palisade in the shape of an ellipse had been hastily erected around it, and near its centre stood the great pavilion inhabited by the King. To the south of this was the royal dining-tent, between which and the palisade were two cooking-tents and a pen for cattle destined for the royal table. Between the royal pavilion and the palisade, to the west of it, stood the tent of the Crown Prince Ardi-Belit. Next to the dining-tent came a space surrounded by a rope barrier, in which stood the sacred chariot, bearing the two standards of Ashur, that accompanied the King on all his expeditions, and a portable altar, whereon the priests offered sacrifices morning and evening with the same rites as in Nineveh. Next to this sacred enclosure stood the tent occupied by Neziach and Nehushta and a smaller one for Neziach's other attendants. On the north of the royal pavilion stood the large tent where the royal chariot and the King's horses were stalled and the tents of the *Tartans* and of the *Rab-shakeh*.

When Neziach and Nehushta were brought to the camp, Nehushta's hopes had begun to dwindle, for nine days had by then elapsed since her short interview with Shemidah in the Palace at Ekron, and no word had come from the spy during all that time.

Uncertainty and anxiety gained a stronger hold upon her mind every day, and soon to these were added other terrible and definite fears: fear of the effects of her own wonderful beauty and fear of the terrible disease which was dogging the Great King's footsteps. And these fears were all the more terrible because, in the meanwhile, she learnt that the long-expected rescue was at last close at hand.

The dreaded plague made a sudden appearance within the carefully-guarded camp. The scribe of Ashur-killani was seized with the usual symptoms and before sunset he lay dead in his tent.

A wave of terror swept through the Assyrians. The soldiers said openly that the gods of the land were vastly offended and that even Ashur himself, so far removed from his shrines, was powerless against them, while the Great King became deeply affected by this fresh calamity and his dismay and superstitious fear grew stronger than ever. The soothsayers and the priests were appealed to so that the angry god might be appeased, but they would not commit themselves and spoke vaguely and in riddles. For how was it possible, in this Land of the West, where a different god was worshipped on every hill, to say which was the redoubtable one who killed men like flies? Was it Baal-Zebub of Ekron, whose shrine was so near? Was it one of the numerous *Baalim* who held sway down the Phœnician coast, or mighty Dagon of the Philistines? Was it even Great Ptah of Egypt, angry at the defeat of his worshippers and striking from afar, from amid his burning deserts? Or was it, as some began to whisper, the sombre God of the thunder-clouds who dwelt up yonder in unconquered Jerusalem, the God Jahveh whose prophets flouted and

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insulted Ashur and all the gods of the nations ? Who could say ?

Two slaves were ordered to wrap the scribe's bloated corpse in a cloth and to take and bury it in the bed of the wady ; and when, after painfully scrambling down the steep bank with their heavy burden, they had accomplished their task, the officers under whose eyes they had been working shot a few well-aimed arrows from the banks of the wady at the two miserable wretches, so that they fell dead on the grave which they had just filled.

On the night of the sixth of Tishri Nehushta, waking suddenly in the middle of the night, saw, by the dim light of the tiny lamp which hung from the centre pole of the tent, a brown hand inserted under the tent-flap. A bare arm followed it, and as she gazed, fascinated and unable to utter a sound, a man's figure stole silently into the tent. Before she had time to move or to wake Neziach, the man took a step forward and, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, Nehushta recognized Shemidah. The spy seemed utterly exhausted. He dropped on to his hands and knees and, creeping close to the couch where Nehushta was lying, whispered his message into her ear.

"This morning I saw the Prince Amon at Bethshemesh, and the whole day I have travelled to bring thee word of him. He bids thee hope, for he is coming to thy rescue."

"But how didst thou get into the camp ?" whispered Nehushta. "It is strongly guarded on every side."

"I climbed up the banks of the wady and, by watching my opportunity, I crept like a snake past the sentinels. I could have killed one or two of them, but

if they found the bodies they would put more guards on this side of the camp, and so make thy rescue more difficult. To-morrow night Amon and his men will leave Beth-shemesh, and on the night of the eighth or ninth of Tishri be thou ready, for he will come."

At that very moment Neziach awoke and was about to speak, but with a gesture the Princess silenced her. When she turned again to speak to Shemidah, he had disappeared as silently as he had come.

Nehushta repeated Shemidah's words to Neziach, and though the *Kedeshah* rejoiced with her, the Princess saw a look of wistful regret creep into her eyes because, for her, the future held no promise of release, but only the certainty of eternal exile in a distant and strange land. And in that moment the heart of Nehushta, Princess of the B'ne-David, went out to Neziach, the *Kedeshah* who had been sold into a foul captivity by her own flesh and blood, but in whose soul there burnt the clear flame of self-sacrifice.

"Neziach," said the Princess, clasping the *Kedeshah's* hand between her own, "let not thy heart be cast down, for if Amon succeed in penetrating into the camp, he shall rescue thee too. And one day thou shalt return to thine own people in Gilead, for the B'ne-David shall reward thee greatly because of what thou hast done for me."

A look of anguish passed over Neziach's face.

"Nay, Princess! I will have naught to do with my own people," she replied, shaking her head sadly, "for they sold me into shame and bondage, and as for him whom I loved, he would despise me and draw aside the skirt of his garment lest it touch me. But if so be that thou wilt let me go with thee, and be thy

slave and be ever at thy side, then shall I be willing to escape when the time comes."

"Neziach," cried the Princess, her face still aglow with happiness at the thought of Amon's coming, "thou hast only to ask and the King, my father, shall give thee all the desire of thy heart."

An intense joy filled her soul and during the remainder of the night she was unable to sleep. But her happiness was destined to have a rude awakening, for, the morning after Shemidah's nocturnal visit, two of the Crown Prince's eunuchs came to Neziach's tent and expressed a desire to speak with Miriam, her Hebrew attendant. Trembling and wondering, Nehushta came out to them. She saw two fat, loose-lipped men, with heavy, beardless jowls, whose appearance filled her with disgust. Seeing the glow of happiness which still animated Nehushta's face and which, in spite of her fears, she was unable to hide entirely, the eunuchs looked knowingly at each other and laughed coarsely.

"By our Lady Ishtar," said one of them to the other, "I will wager this beauteous Hebrew wench knoweth already what message we bring and her heart rejoices at the thought of the honour that awaits her."

"Say to the Princess Nehushta, thy mistress," continued the other eunuch, "that the Prince Ardi-Belit, Prince of Nineveh and Lord of Kalah, first-born son of the Great King, our master, hath deigned to look with favour upon thee, and he commands thy mistress to let thee go forth this very night, when we come to lead thee to his tent."

It seemed to Nehushta as if the whole world had suddenly gone black about her. There was a roaring noise in her ears through which the eunuch's words

sounded like so many hammer-blows on her brain. Pale as death, she listened silently and, going into the tent, repeated the message with breaking voice to Neziach. The *Kedeshah* had not yet risen from her couch, and, like a flash of lightning, an inspiration came upon her.

“Miriam, there is a way to save thee,” she whispered to the terrified and unhappy girl. “Thou saidst that the Prince Amon would come to-morrow night, or perchance the night after. To gain time, say now to the eunuchs that I am fallen sick and that I cannot do without some one of my own people to be near me. Say that the Princess Nehushta sends greetings to the Prince Ardi-Belit, and begs him to allow her handmaiden to abide with her yet two more days, and that on the evening of the third day thou shalt go to him. By that time the Prince Amon will have come and all may yet be well. Go, go quickly, and I will make myself ready!” saying which Neziach unbound the heavy masses of her raven hair and cried out as one in pain.

Nehushta went out to the eunuchs and was careful to stand at the entrance of the tent, holding the flap half open, so that they could see Neziach within, her hair unbound, and apparently tossing in pain on her couch at the back of the tent.

“Why, what ails thy mistress?” asked one of the eunuchs, with a concerned glance at the interior of the tent. “Surely not——” and he pointed significantly in the direction of the wady.

“Nay, Jahveh forbid it!” answered Nehushta. “I know only that all night she hath lain awake and cried aloud because of the pain.”

Very hurriedly the two eunuchs took their departure and Nehushta thanked Jahveh in her heart because

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a way of escape had once more been found for her, and her faith was greatly strengthened within her.

The two women spent the remainder of the day a prey to the greatest anxiety, for they feared lest the Great King, hearing as he was bound to do of Neziach's illness, should send his own physician to attend to her, and that the latter might pronounce her to be well. But no physician came that day nor the next day, for fresh calamities were falling upon the camp, and Sennacherib could spare no thought for the favourite of a moment.

The pestilence, like some capricious god that delights in striking at random and in torturing men with doubts and uncertainty, held back its hand for a whole day after the death of Ashur-killani's scribe, and for a moment the Assyrians were lulled into the belief that the prayers and exorcisms of their priests had been successful in appeasing the anger of the gods. Then the rats began to appear.

The watching sentinels saw dozens of them dart out of the bushes on the opposite side of the wady, and in a very short time nothing was left of the two miserable wretches who had been killed by the officers' arrows except the bare bones. The boldest of the vermin climbed up the eastern bank of the wady, and though hundreds of them must have been killed by the soldiers, others got past them, especially at night, and the camp became rapidly infested with them.

On the eighth of Tishri the pestilence struck again. More than forty soldiers and half a dozen officers were seized with the fatal symptoms, and the miserable wretches were abandoned to their fate, for no one dared to go near them, in spite of their delirious cries. During the night their screams and shrieks could be

heard all over the camp, and next morning those who ventured to cast a glance into their tents drew back horrified.

The rats, grown ferocious with hunger, because of the strong watch which the soldiers kept over all food, had found their way into the dying and defenceless men's tents.

Throughout that same night, terrified by the cries of the plague-stricken soldiers, Nehushta and Neziach sat wide awake, waiting for the promised coming of Amon. But he came not, for he knew nothing of the pressing danger in which Nehushta stood; and when the morning of the ninth day of Tishri dawned, the Princess wept bitterly in her disappointment. And it so happened that, in her efforts to console her, Neziach brought about the very catastrophe which her ingenuity had succeeded in avoiding thus far.

Sakannu, one of the eunuchs who had brought the message from the Crown Prince, chancing to pass by Neziach's tent and hearing the sound of sobs and of a gentle, consoling voice, was attacked by a strong curiosity. Approaching one of the sides of the tent, he silently and deftly made a small hole in the cloth with a knife which he drew from his belt, and applying his eye to the opening he saw the Princess Nehushta, apparently in perfect health, sitting on her couch and holding in her arms her Hebrew attendant, Miriam, who was weeping bitterly and whom she was trying to console.

There was here some mystery which Sakannu's mind, in spite of its low cunning, did not altogether apprehend, but he understood clearly enough that the Princess Nehushta's illness had either been feigned or else that she had made a very quick and complete recovery,

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and he also deduced from his slight knowledge of Hebrew that, for some inexplicable reason, this girl, beautiful, it is true, but nevertheless a slave, did not desire the honour which the noble Prince Ardi-Belit was so anxious to confer upon her.

A slow smile of satisfaction overspread the eunuch's features as he withdrew his eye from the hole in the tent-cloth. One thing he realized very quickly, that praise and advancement might be his portion if he disclosed to his master the deceit which had been practised upon him. Coming round to the front of the tent, he boldly lifted the flap and, standing at the entrance, put his head within. The two women flew apart, with a cry of dismay.

"Thou art indeed a good and faithful servant, O Miriam," said the eunuch, speaking slowly in Aramaic, and as if he were rolling each word upon his tongue and tasting it before he uttered it, "to have taken such good care of thy mistress ! I go now to tell the Prince, my master, that thou art free to serve his pleasure, and if I mistake not, thou couldst have been free two days ago," and with a sneering laugh the eunuch withdrew his head and disappeared, leaving the two women to their misery.

They tried to console themselves with the thought that Amon would surely come that very night, for She-midah had said that he would come on the night of the eighth or the ninth of Tishri, but perhaps—perhaps—he would be too late ! Or perhaps some unforeseen circumstance might delay him still another night, and then surely it would be too late ! And now the only avenue of escape, the hope that further delay might be gained by pleading the continuance of Neziach's illness, was cut off, for Ardi-Belit, certain that some deceit

had been practised on him, would wait no longer to satisfy his desire.

Within an hour Nehushta's worst fears were realized. A messenger came from the Great King himself, and his message was to this effect: That, seeing how the pestilence was increasing almost hourly in the camp, the Great King had decided to abandon it on the morrow. At dawn, escorted by his bodyguard and taking with him the Princess Nehushta and her attendants, he would depart by the shortest route for Nineveh. And that night he would honour the Princess mightily by commanding her to be present at the evening meal in the royal tent, with her Hebrew maiden, Miriam, upon whom it had pleased the Prince Ardi-Belit to look with favour.

For, fearing some further rebuff, and not quite daring to act with a high hand where his father's latest favourite was concerned, Ardi-Belit had appealed to the Great King, and Nehushta and Neziach knew that to disobey such a command meant death or worse.

Despairingly Nehushta signified to the messenger her mistress's obedience to the royal command, and when the messenger had gone she turned to Neziach, with the light of her tragic resolve in her eyes.

"To-night, O Neziach," she cried, drawing out the dagger which had never left her, "unless Amon comes in time, thou shalt see how a Princess of the B'ne-David knows how to die for love!"

And for the first time Neziach hung her head and a great shame came upon her, because she had not known how to die for love, rather than accept shame.

Throughout the burning day the conditions of the camp became steadily worse. Sentinels were stricken down at their posts; corpses lay about on every side,

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and the survivors lacked even the energy, so great was their terror, to drive the horrible vermin that infested the camp away from their foul meals. The fiery rays of the sun caused an indescribable stench to arise from the plague-stricken camp, and towards evening masses of black clouds began to gather in the west, portending what was almost a miracle at this season and in this region, the coming of a great thunderstorm over the land. The air grew hot and oppressive with the desert wind, so that strong men lay on the ground and panted like dogs.

All day a wild hope was present in Nehushta's mind : the hope that Shemidah would return to the camp and, learning of the new danger whose black shadow was creeping ever nearer to her, would be able to warn Amon in time. But nothing happened and no one came to relieve the Princess's fears. As she watched the sun sinking into a mass of dark clouds, all hope abandoned her. A kind of dull despair seemed to be slowly paralysing all her faculties, and it was only by actual physical contact with the dagger, the handle of which she touched at intervals as if to assure herself of its presence, that she was able to remind herself that, at any rate, that way of escape was still open to her. She felt that only a supreme manifestation of Jahveh's power would now avail to save her from the death which she meant to inflict upon herself rather than belong to any man but Amon.

An hour after sunset, which was the time at which the evening meal was partaken of, Neziach and Nehushta left their tent. As they skirted the sacred enclosure, Nehushta, whose senses were for the moment abnormally acute, so that every sight and sound was magnified, noticed that a dull fire burnt on the portable altar.

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Occasionally the priest, whose duty it was to watch it throughout the night, would throw a few sticks or a handful of spices upon it, and by the light of the little flames that leapt up the two standards of Ashur seemed to her to loom gigantic and threatening on their chariot near by.

The camp presented a weird and terrifying spectacle at that hour. As a further precaution, an inner ring of fires had been lighted outside the wooden palisade that surrounded the royal enclosure, and clouds of smoke from burning spices ascended continually from these as well as from the outer ring of trench fires into the inky blackness of the clouds, which were lighted up at intervals by flashes of distant lightning. The cries and lamentations of the dying and plague-stricken soldiers were heard on all sides, though at times they were almost drowned by the enormous rumbling of the approaching storm. Several times Nehushta and Neziach had to step aside to avoid delirious and dying soldiers who rolled about on the ground in their agony, while the suffocating stench of decaying corpses rose up from the ground all around them almost like a visible emanation, and everywhere foul vermin scurried away into the darkness before their feet.

Inside the dining-tent, a low table was heaped up with food. At one side of it the Great King himself reclined on a couch, anger and rage as well as superstitious fear written on his face. Behind him stood half a dozen slaves, some fanning him with great fans of ostrich feathers, while others served him with food and drink. The air inside the tent was thick with the fumes of spices which were being burnt in small copper braziers. At the King's right hand sat Ardi-Belit, on a

low stool, and next to him there was an empty seat, while on the King's left there was also an empty seat. On entering the tent the two women prostrated themselves, according to custom, and at a sign from the chief eunuch slaves rushed forward and led them to the two vacant seats, Nehushta to the one at the side of the Crown Prince, while Neziach sat on the King's left hand.

Throughout the meal, which was accompanied by the constant rumble and crash of thunder, Nehushta sat almost silent, answering with a "yea" and a "nay" the questions which Ardi-Belit put to her. Always she could feel his burning glances upon her and once she shrank as his hand touched hers, whereat he scowled angrily.

The supreme moment had come. Slaves removed the table and one of them knelt before the King with a golden bowl filled with perfumed water, so that he might wash his hands. The thunder grew louder and louder. The hissing noise of a heavy downpour began to be heard and the distant cries and lamentations of the soldiers seemed suddenly to increase and to take on a new note of terror. At a sign from Ardi-Belit, two eunuchs stepped towards Nehushta, to lead her forth to the Prince's tent.

She stood up and with a sudden movement drew forth the glittering dagger. She was about to plunge it into her breast before the astonished eunuchs could interfere, when, suddenly, louder than the thunder or the sound of the falling rain, a great outcry burst forth outside the tent. A number of Assyrians, forgetful of all discipline, rushed in with terror-stricken faces.

"The God of the Plague is come," they cried wildly,

“and with him comes Mighty Ashur!” A deafening crash of thunder shook the very earth and the whole of the front part of the tent collapsed, revealing the full fury of the storm without, while dozens of warriors, slashing pitilessly to right and left and with shouts of “*Chereb Jahveh!*” rushed into the tent.

They were led by a gigantic figure, clad in shining scale-armour. In his right hand flashed a great sword and in his left he whirled one of the standards of Ashur as if it were but a twig. With a great cry of joy, Nehushta dropped the uplifted dagger and rushed towards him.

* * * * *

Although Shemidah had been successful in slipping unobserved into the Assyrian camp in order to warn Nehushta, he came near to losing his life on making a second attempt to communicate with her. He was, therefore, unable to convey to Amon any knowledge of the new danger which threatened the Princess, else the Prince would have raided the camp on the night of the eighth of Tishri regardless of any risk. During the whole of that day, however, the Hebrews had lain hidden in the tangle of hills to the south of Gederoth, and when, towards evening, they entered the little town, Shemidah could only inform him that he had duly warned Nehushta of his coming, but had been unable to see her again.

Frightened by the reports which reached him concerning the spread of the pestilence, which had already killed many people in Gederoth itself, Amon impetuously wished to attack the Assyrians that very night. But the men and horses were worn out with their night march and their day spent among the hills, where they were afraid to light fires for fear of betraying their

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presence to any wandering bands of Assyrians, and so, on Shaftan's advice, it was determined to postpone the attack until the following day, an hour after sunset, when the Assyrians would be preparing or consuming their evening meal, thus offering an opportune moment for a surprise.

About an hour before sunset, therefore, on the ninth of Tishri, when the clouds that betokened an approaching thunderstorm were already beginning to gather, the Hebrews set out of Gederoth and safely forded the Wady Gederoth to the west of the point where the Wady Balkash branched off. They passed west of Makkedah and rode slowly along the low chain of hills behind which lay the Assyrian encampment. When darkness had entirely fallen, twenty-five men, each mounted and leading a spare horse, were posted just below the crest of the hills, out of sight of the Assyrian sentinels. The rest of the *Gibborim*, led by Amon and Shaftan, and taking advantage of every bush and boulder, crept slowly over the crest of the hill, down into the Wady Balkash and up the other side.

The storm was approaching nearer every moment. The sky was rent again and again by vivid flashes of lightning, which revealed the dark mass of the camp on the opposite bank of the wady, and the first large, round drops of rain were beginning to fall. Between the Hebrews and the Assyrian camp there lay an open space some eighty or ninety feet wide, while immediately facing them ran the wooden palisade of the royal enclosure, which was some six feet high. Of the inner ring of fires, only three or four had been lighted on the side which faced the wady, and, although most of the open ground between the palisade and the wady was lighted by their flames, there were dark patches

along which Amon and his men crept, silently and slowly, taking advantage of the smallest cover, until they reached the palisade.

When they saw the gigantic form of Amon, sword in hand, and followed by the *Gibborim*, dropping from the top of the palisade, the Assyrian sentinels, whose courage was already undermined by fear of the dreaded pestilence and by superstitious terrors, fled like terrified children. In a few instants all the Hebrews were over the wooden defences and, as luck would have it, they found themselves opposite Neziach's tent, which Shemidah, who was with them, was able to point out. By this time the fleeing soldiers had given the alarm, and from everywhere men began to spring up. But the cry of one of the sentinels, more superstitious or terrified than his fellows, had done its work. Amid the crashing of thunder and the hissing of the rain, which was beginning to extinguish the fires, the Assyrians ran in every direction away from the raiders, crying that the God of the Plague had invaded the camp.

To Amon's intense dismay, the Hebrews found the tent empty, but outside it there stood one of Neziach's attendants, a Phœnician, who had no difficulty in understanding the excited exclamations of the Hebrews, since their language was practically the same as hers. Her native wit quickly enabled her to grasp the situation. In a few words she informed them that her mistress, together with Miriam, her Hebrew attendant, had been bidden to the royal dining-tent, where they would probably be at that moment. Like a whirlwind Amon and Shaftan, at the head of their men, rushed off to the left, scattering the few Assyrians who tried to stop them. They did not even wait to go round the sacred enclosure wherein stood the chariot

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standards and the altar of Ashur. With a stroke of his sword Amon cut through the rope barrier, and like hounds after their quarry the Hebrews rushed through, killing the priest at the altar and scattering its ashes on their way. Seized by a sudden inspiration, Amon plucked one of the thick ten-foot standards of Ashur from its chariot and, wielding it like a club in his left hand, rushed forward.

There was no mistaking the dining-tent, for slaves were rushing in and out in wild confusion. The Hebrews attacked the frail structure with savage fury and slashed away the whole of its front in their eagerness. By this time, however, the soldiers who were within the royal enclosure, realizing that these were no other-world visitants, gathered their courage and began to attack the Hebrews, who defended themselves valiantly, striving always to keep their leader unharmed so that he might succeed in his desperate enterprise.

Amon and twenty or thirty *Gibborim* rushed into the tent at the very moment that a deafening peal of thunder rent the sky and shook the earth. By the light of the many little lamps in the tent the Prince saw Nehushta standing between two eunuchs, an uplifted dagger in her hand. A great cry of joy escaped her when she beheld Amon, and, dropping the dagger, she flew to his arms.

The Great King and Ardi-Belit had risen to their feet, grasping the swords which lay near them, and, after they had recovered from the first moment of superstitious terror caused by the cry of the Assyrians who had rushed into the tent, that the God of the Plague had invaded the camp, they prepared themselves to fight to the death. But the *Gibborim* had

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received strict orders to subordinate everything to the safe recapture of Nehushta and immediately that Amon felt her safe in his arms, with a voice that could be heard even above the crashing of the thunder he cried to his men, "Back ! back !" for he realized that their only hope of safety lay in getting out of the camp before the bulk of the Assyrians should have time to recover from their panic.

For an instant the glances of the Great King and of the Hebrew Prince crossed like two blades, and in that moment it seemed to Sennacherib that he saw before him, in the flesh, the gigantic figure which had appeared to him the night before Altaku, bidding him gaze upon the Wrath of the Messenger of Jahveh. And in that moment, too, a terrible doubt assailed the Great King's mind. Was Jahveh indeed mightier than Ashur, and were all his own mighty armies less than the dust before His wrath ?

A terrible fight ensued between the *Gibborim* and the Assyrians, who ran up from every side. Keeping Nehushta, who clung tenaciously to Neziach, in the centre of a ring, and slashing with his mighty sword, while he laid many low with the heavy standard of Ashur, which he wielded as if it were a club in his left hand, Amon and his men made a running fight to the wady, and in their efforts to save their leader, many a brave *Gibbor* bit the dust. Over corpses and dying men, amid shrieks and crashings of thunder, in a down-pour of heavy rain which caused still greater confusion by extinguishing the fires and torches, they slowly fought their way to the wady. And there a new difficulty presented itself.

The bed of the ravine was being rapidly converted into a raging torrent. But Amon felt that nothing

could stop him now, and, holding Nehushta high in the air, he scrambled down the side and waded, almost breast high, through the boiling waters, followed by the remaining *Gibborim* who helped Neziach to cross. Here again several of the Hebrews lost their lives in the raging flood, but at last, dripping and covered with blood from wounds which he had scarcely felt, Amon and Nehushta stood among the men whom the Prince had left just over the crest of the hill.

Two circumstances had contributed to the success of the Prince's daring raid: the lack of more than a few horses in the comparatively small Assyrian camp, and the inability of such as there were to cross the boiling torrent into which the ravine had been converted. For this reason Amon, once he found himself on the other side of the wady, would not stir until Shaftan, who had been so ready to sacrifice his life for him if need be, stood safely by his side, though bearing many wounds. Mounting one of the horses, with Nehushta held close to him, Amon and the fifty horsemen galloped off to the north, leaving the rest of the *Gibborim* to follow as best they might. They made a wide detour so as to pass far to the north of Ekron, and riding through the wild and stormy night, they made for Gezer; where, if all had gone well, they should find the King of Judah's soldiers once more in possession of the town.

Scouts were sent out, and at dawn Amon, Shaftan, Nehushta and Neziach, surrounded by the victorious Hebrews who had raided and recaptured Gezer on the previous day, stood on the great battlements of the city, looking towards the west. By the fiery light of the rising sun, dark masses could be discerned moving northwards on the distant plains. Panic-stricken before the pestilence and still under the influence of the

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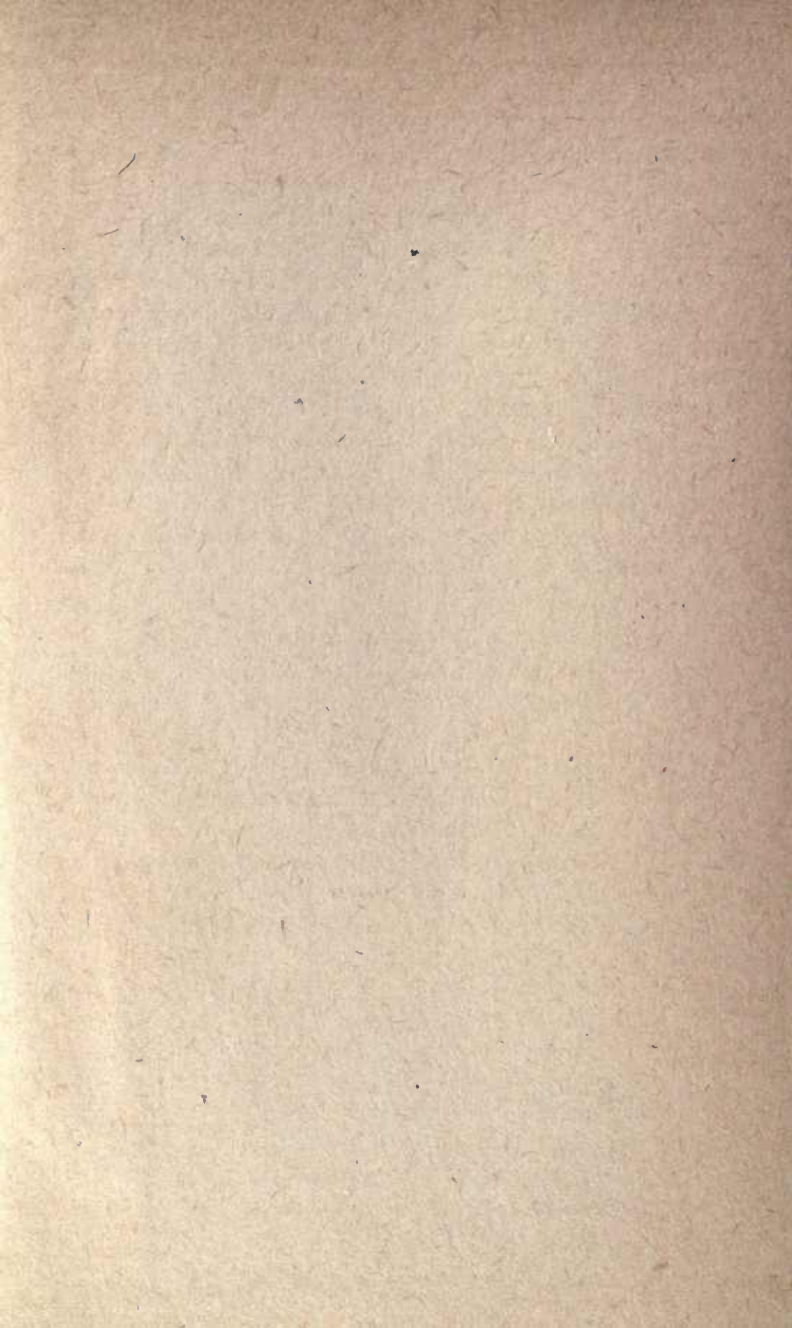
mysterious irruption of the Hebrews, what remained of the Assyrians, both before Altaku and on the Plain of Makkedah, was melting northwards like a cloud.

As the sun rose still higher over the hills of Judah, the smoke of the sacrifices ascended from the High Place of Gezer, for throughout the land they were celebrating the Day of the Atonement for the sins of the people. Drawing Nehushta closer to him Amon turned his face towards the Holy City, and there came into his mind the words which Elishama the Priest had spoken when all felt that nothing could resist the might of the enormous and unconquered army of Assyria: "Jahveh saves and Jahveh destroys! Jahveh of Hosts shall cause the Assyrians to be swallowed up!"

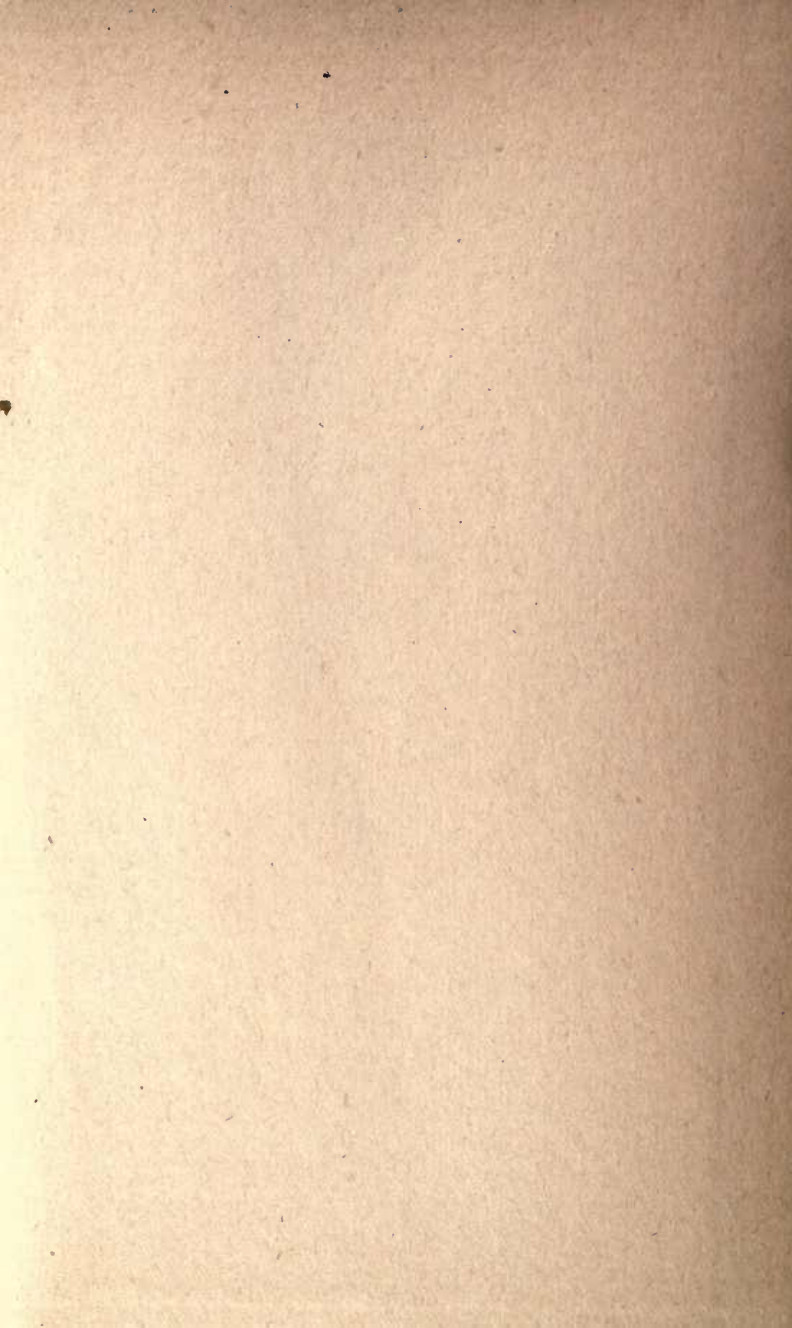
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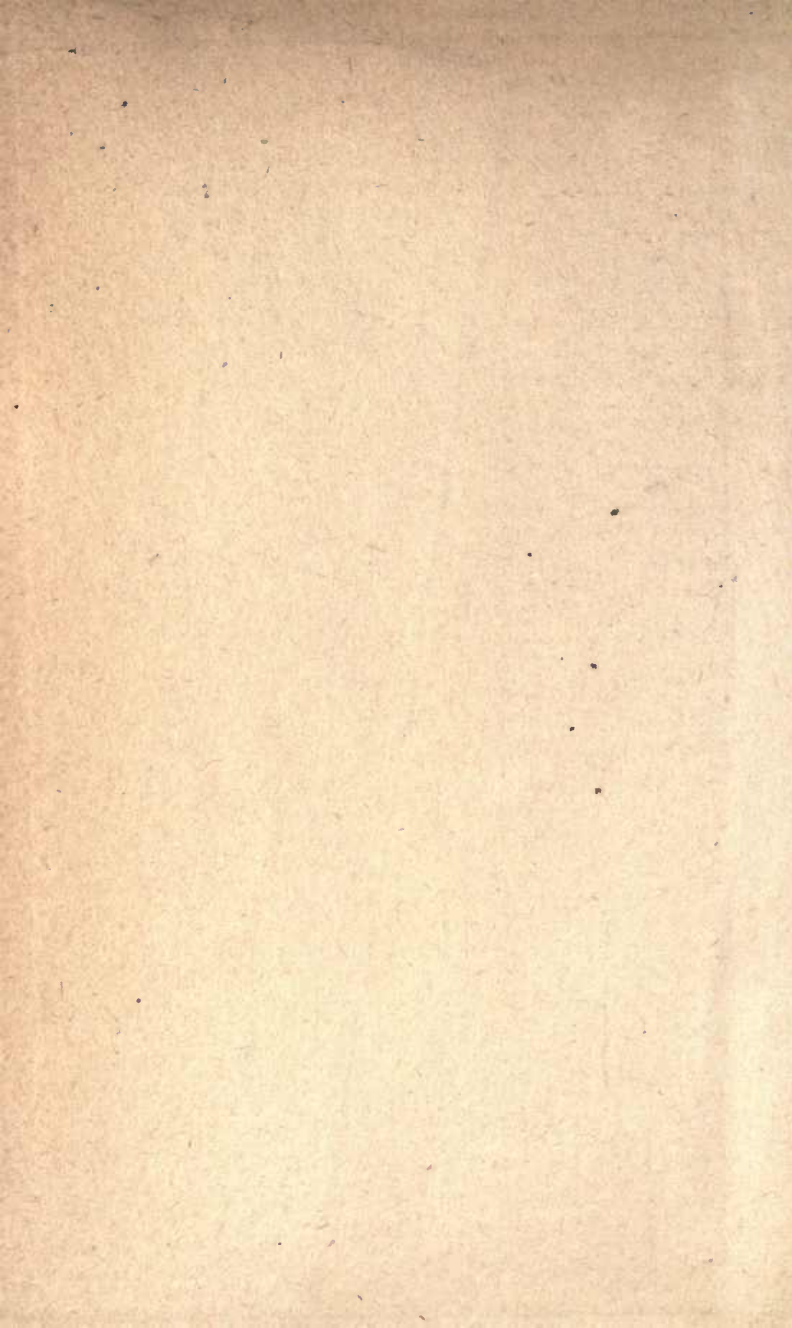
And thus was justified the sublime faith of the Holy Prophet Isaiah and of his disciple, King Hezekiah of Judah, for never again did Assyria attempt to destroy Jerusalem, and when, a century later, after Nineveh had been blotted out for ever from the face of the earth, amid a storm of blood and fire, Jahveh no longer reigned in the hearts and minds of the Hebrews as the God of Israel alone, for He had become instead the Mighty God who made the heavens and the earth, and who could be, and was, worshipped in Babylon as well as in Jerusalem.

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